

**Children's Imaginary Companions
and the Purposes They Serve:
An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

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Abstract

The aims of this research were to explore the characteristics and purposes served by imaginary companions (ICs) featuring in the lives of children from a normative sample, as this has rarely been investigated.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with two samples. The first study comprised of five children including both girls and boys aged between five and ten years of age. The second study involved a sample of girls who were homogeneous by age, (eleven years), gender (female) and ethnicity (White, British). A feature of both studies was to explore all the imaginary companions, both current and previous, that each child had had over time. The data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore individual and cross case themes.

Whilst children acknowledged their imaginary status, the companions presented as real to the children, and particular characteristics of the ICs and features of the child's interaction with their imaginary companions served to foster this illusion. Qualities and characteristics of animal and human imaginary companions were mostly positive. A number of ICs had unfriendly characteristics, though these mostly served a positive purpose for the child. All children were able to say why their imaginary companions were important and special. Some children were able to explain how their ICs met their needs and a range of purposes served were identified. Some children had more than one current imaginary companion (IC) with each IC meeting different needs. Imaginary companions meeting emotional needs were more private in contrast to those who were primarily playmates, or providing wish fulfillment and entertainment. The imaginary companions of the eldest children were mostly unknown to others, or partially concealed in games. This seemed to be in response to the anticipated responses of others.

Methodological issues, psychological applications and research implications are discussed.

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Declaration

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

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Statement

My motivation to undertake the doctorate in education programme was firstly to develop my knowledge and skills in a range of research methodologies at doctoral level. My role as academic and professional tutor on the doctoral professional training programme for educational psychologists requires me to contribute to teaching on research methods and the supervision of research undertaken by trainee educational psychologists. Secondly, I wanted to extend my understanding of the development of professional knowledge. I felt this would enhance my skills in teaching and programme development as tutor, and would facilitate my role as senior educational psychologist in co-coordinating and providing training for educational psychologists and other professionals. Thirdly, I have had a particular professional and academic interest in children's friendships (e.g. Roffey, Tarrant, & Majors, 1994). I was keen to further develop my psychological knowledge with regard to children's emotions and social relationships. I anticipated that this would enhance my professional practice as an educational psychologist and would contribute to my teaching in this area on the educational psychologist training programme. The six modules, institution focused study and thesis elements of the doctorate have enabled me to pursue these three areas.

I have taken opportunities to extend my knowledge of primarily qualitative, but also quantitative approaches in research. In Methods of Inquiry 1, I conducted a critical evaluation of an ethnographic study of adolescent girls' friendships (Hey, 1997). This enabled me to understand how a range of sources can be brought together for analysis and interpretation. In this study, the notes girls sent to each other in class, diary records and interviews formed the basis for the analysis and interpretation. Hey's study also alerted me to the social and cultural influences on female friendships.

Methods of Inquiry 2 provided me with the opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of a funded project I was involved in as an educational psychologist. This was to organise and facilitate pupil support groups for identified vulnerable pupils who had

recently transferred to secondary school, with the aim of improving school attendance. Issues dealt with in the group included friendship and dating issues, self-esteem, exclusion and various forms of bullying. I carried out a primarily quantitative study involving random control groups to match pupil support groups in a number of secondary schools. I found that pupil support groups were effective in improving attendance and/or maintaining attendance whilst pupils attended the group. Pupils who were given the opportunity to attend the group for a longer period (because they were perceived as having more difficulties) were more likely to continue with improved attendance after the group came to an end. This study raised my awareness of some of the challenges in collecting quantitative data (and subsequent analysis). In this study, this included incomplete or inaccurate school records of absence, and significant variation between schools in the categorising and recording of authorised and unauthorised absence.

Pupils gave positive evaluations of their participation in the groups. They listened and were supportive to each other. They reported increased levels of self-esteem and confidence. Having regular contact with pupils in the support group made me aware of the importance of listening to their views. For example, it raised my awareness of forms of bullying such as posting abusive messages on school computers and threatening telephone calls and text messages that some of the pupils had experienced. I was able to feed this back to the school and incorporate strategies to address these newer forms of bullying into the local authority anti-bullying initiative, which I was co-coordinating at the time.

In the Psychology and Special Needs modules 1 and 2 I argued that schools had (until recently) tended to ignore the emotional and social needs of children. I explored the reasons for this and then considered how these needs could be met in the educational setting. An important part of developing teaching practice would be to seek the views of teachers on how confident and capable they felt in meeting these needs and what they felt their own professional development needs were.

For the Advanced Research module, I planned a qualitative study, devising semi-structured interviews for secondary school teachers to elicit these views.

The module on Notions of Professionalism and the topic I chose for the institution focused study enabled me to examine concepts of professional development and the theory-practice divide as well as to consider conceptual frameworks for enhancing professional knowledge. I have argued that one of the challenges in providing effective continued professional development is that our knowledge of how professionals develop and expand their knowledge and practice is unrefined and in need of further exploration. The assignment submitted for the Notions of Professionalism module formed the basis of a jointly written article on these issues in relation to the profession of educational psychology (Lunt & Majors, 2000).

The institution focused study was a small scale exploratory study to explore whether, and in what ways, the professional thinking and practice of teachers had changed as a result of undertaking a two-year, part-time accredited course in psychology and special needs. This was a standards funded project which I jointly planned. My role also included teaching, tutorial support and supervision of research projects. This piece of research enabled me to carry out an in-depth analysis of the personal and professional development of course participants. I used a qualitative approach and in carrying out the research, I have developed my skills in interviewing and using grounded theory.

Undertaking this research enabled me to provide a detailed course evaluation for the accreditation panel. It has also very much enhanced my understanding of important features of professional development and the need to refine frameworks for professional and personal progression. As a consequence of this research, I am more aware of the significance of the social and emotional dimensions of learning, and for course participants to be active, reflective learners with opportunities for directing their study. This has influenced my teaching on the doctoral programme, and the training and supervision I contribute to for other professionals. My studies

have also enhanced my work for the educational psychology service, where I have devised and implemented policies for appraisal, supervision and peer consultation and continued professional development (CPD).

I made a joint presentation based on my findings to a national conference on teacher supply and retention; this was subsequently written up as an article for a publication of the conference proceedings (Majors & Weston, 2002). I think that the two pieces of published work I have mentioned in this section demonstrate that as a result of my studies, I have been able to contribute to the knowledge and thinking on professional practice.

It has been very rewarding to carry out research on children's imaginary companions – a phenomenon that I knew little about before this. I am particularly interested in the purposes they serve for children and have greatly increased my knowledge and understanding of this. I plan to continue research in this area, and am interested in seeking the perceptions of adolescents with special educational needs who have imaginary companions. I think that whilst they may serve similar purposes as for others, there may well also be some distinct purposes served. I am also interested in seeking the views of adults who recall childhood imaginary companions as I think their understanding and reflection on the purposes served will be illuminating.

I have outlined how my research can be applied in Chapter 7. Undertaking this research has stimulated my interest more generally in the significance of imagination and play and how they can be used to support children's development and emotional needs. I am planning to undertake training in play therapy to enhance my professional practice.

I have found the exploration of qualitative methodologies and in particular IPA, very stimulating and of relevance to my role as an educational psychologist and tutor. As a consequence, I feel I am able to provide better teaching and learning opportunities and research supervision for the trainee educational psychologists I work with.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

There has been little research on imaginary companions and the purposes they serve for the children that create them. Further, much of the research that has been done has been undertaken with pre-school children (e.g. Gleason, 2004a; Harter & Chao, 1992; Carlson & Taylor, 2005). It would appear that researchers have sometimes assumed that children's imaginary companions, often evident at the age of two and a half to three years, will have mostly disappeared by the time the children start school (e.g. Taylor, Carlson, Maring, Gerow, & Charley, 2004). More recent research (e.g. Pearson et al, 2001; Hoff, 2004-2005; Hoff, 2005) shows that imaginary companions are more common for older children than previously thought (albeit in a more private form).

I have had an academic and professional interest in children's friendships (Roffey, Tarrant, & Majors, 1994; 1997; 2000). I think because of this, and the scarcity of current research in the UK on imaginary companions, over recent years I have been increasingly consulted about children's imaginary companions. I have been asked if they were a positive feature in a child's life or not, and whether parents should be concerned. This phenomenon has received little attention from within my profession of educational psychology, and I therefore chose to research this phenomenon for my thesis.

Some, but not all, of the research on children's imaginary companions show positive associations with aspects of social, emotional and cognitive development (e.g. Taylor, 1999; Singer & Singer, 1990; Jalongo, 1984). Parents can have a positive view of their child's imaginary companions, some seeing them as a sign of their child's high levels of imagination. Yet, at the same time, there is sometimes concern in the public domain (for example as evidenced on parent information web-sites) about whether the imaginary companion is a positive feature in a child's

life, or a more negative feature to be discouraged (e.g. O'Malley, 2004; Brott, 2004; Gurain, 2004; Indiaparenting, 1999; Kelly, 2004; Hageman, 1999; Heins, 2004). As Kelly observes, children with imaginary companions have sometimes been perceived to be lacking friends and withdrawn. O'Malley points out that over time this has led to negative stereo-typing of these children.

Thus parents are sometimes concerned about whether it is 'healthy' for their child to have imaginary companions, this seems particularly so as the child grows older. I consider this concern to be referring to 'mental health'. I would argue that implicit concerns underlying this are that:

- the presence of an imaginary companion may be mentally unhealthy or a sign of mental health problems particularly for older children.
- it might lead to psychological problems in adulthood, for example, schizophrenia or multiple personality disorder (the latter has been included in the category of Dissociation Identity Disorder in the medical literature).
- children may have problems distinguishing between fantasy and reality.
- children may withdraw from real-life relationships, preferring their imaginary friendships.

There is research evidence to show that children in both normative and clinical samples have imaginary companions. For example, Gleason (2002), Gleason, Sebanc, & Hartup (2000), Taylor, Cartwright, & Carlson (1993), Taylor (1999), Pearson et al (2001), and Mauro (1991), have researched imaginary companions mostly of children from normative samples and have found them to be a relatively common occurrence. Clinical populations have been studied for example, by Bender and Vogel (1941), Nagera (1969), and Benson and Pryor (1973). It should be noted that children with emotional and/or psychological problems are not usually referred to clinicians because they have imaginary companions. Nevertheless it was the curiosity of clinicians such as Bender and Vogel, and

Nagera, who noticed the reporting of imaginary companions in some of the children and adults that they worked with, which led to them researching their role and purpose.

Developmental psychologists in comparison have sought to determine whether, for example, children with imaginary companions are more intelligent, creative, and/or more or less socially competent in comparison to children who are reported not to have imaginary companions. Samples have often been relatively large numbers of young children including pre-schoolers and those in the first years of schooling. Their findings have led them to mostly report positively on the normality of the experience for children in normative samples. This approach to research has not been primarily concerned with the characteristics of imaginary companions or their purpose. This limited approach may have hampered a better understanding of the phenomenon. As Manosevitz, Prentice, and Wilson (1973) comment that:

The psychoanalytic tradition of exhaustive analysis of single clinical cases with imaginary companions may have contributed to the frequent association of imaginary companion phenomenon with psychopathology. Contrariwise, with its traditional focus on normative development and external reality, child developmentalists have ordinarily neglected the complex motivational bases for such a phenomenon and emphasised its essential normality. (p 72)

The need for the exploration of the nature and purposes of imaginary companions in normative samples has been identified by some developmental psychologists. Gleason et al (2000) comments:

Although researchers studying imaginary companions frequently provide details such as the species or physical characteristics of these creations, the manner in which pretend friends fit into children's lives has largely been uninvestigated.....Whether imaginary companions are playmates, advisors, or in need of caretaking (or all three!) has not been well-established, nor has their prevalence in children's lives. (p 420)

and Taylor et al (2004), observed that:

Less is known about the patterns of social and private pretence in older children, partly because it has been widely claimed that pretend play declines after about 5 years of age. (p 1184)

and noted that:

...we suspect that interviews focused more specifically on how imaginary companions function in the children's lives would be useful for investigating the developmental correlates of this type of play for school-aged children. (p 1185)

The aim of this research was to carry out a detailed exploration of the characteristics and purposes of the imaginary companions of school aged children from a non-clinical sample. I anticipated that eliciting the experiences and perceptions of children would provide different perspectives and insights into the phenomenon. It was thought that a phenomenological approach would enable a rich exploration and analysis of these experiences and perceptions. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is a contemporary form of hermeneutic phenomenology which has been particularly applied to psychological contexts and was therefore selected as the primary method of analysis (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999).

It was anticipated that this study would provide new knowledge concerning the nature of children's imaginary companions and purposes served. I expected that a greater understanding of children's interactions with their imaginary companions and of their developmental and psychological significance would enable professionals and researchers to address concerns raised by parents as outlined above.

Chapter 2

Literature review

Introduction

This chapter reviews relevant research to establish what is known about the characteristics of imaginary companions, the children who create them and purposes served. Research and theorising on aspects of childhood imagination more generally will be drawn upon where this would appear to contribute to our understanding of the processes involved.

I have identified four key areas to investigate as being particularly relevant to the research:

- The definitions and categorisation of imaginary companions and other imaginary phenomena and reported incidence.
- Characteristics of children who have imaginary companions.
- Characteristics of imaginary companions.
- The psychological and developmental significance of imaginary companions and purposes served.

In addition, there is very little research specifically on parental perspectives, and I will conclude with a brief review of what has so far been investigated.

The search strategy involved reference to dictionaries and encyclopedias for the social sciences and searches of bibliographies and catalogues of other libraries. To find books, journals or dissertations, I used electronic databases supplying indexes and abstracts such as PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, the British Education Index,

ERIC and Google Advanced Scholar. Areas searched included the psychological literature on children's imaginary companions, developmental psychology in relation to imaginary companions and play, and emotional, social and cognitive development. I explored psychoanalytic literature in relation to children's imaginary companions, including in relation to transitional phenomena. I also investigated relevant aspects of the literature on Dissociation and Dissociation Identity Disorder. Lastly, I investigated qualitative methodologies with particular reference to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and literature on children as research participants. The main key terms searched included imaginary companions, childhood imagination, imaginative/fantasy play, transitional phenomena, Dissociation Identity Disorder, child research participants, and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Definitions of imaginary phenomena and reported incidence

The various definitions of imaginary companions and related phenomena have had a direct bearing on reported incidence and our consequent understanding or arguably, misunderstanding of the phenomenon.

Imaginary companions are sometimes also referred to as invisible friends or imaginary friends – the latter term is commonly used when interviewing children about their imaginary companions. Many early research studies (and some contemporary studies) have used the following criteria to identify children as having an imaginary companion:

an invisible character, named and referred to in conversation with other persons or played with directly for a period of time, at least several months, having an air of reality for the child but no apparent objective basis. This excludes that type of imaginative play in which an object is personified, or in which the child assumes the role of some person in his environment. (Svendsen, 1934: 988)

Using these criteria, relatively few children were identified and Taylor (1999) notes that only 13.4% of children in Svendsen's study were found to have an imaginary

companion. At a later point in time, other developmental psychologists noted that some children had a very similar relationship with a special toy and began to include them in research where they met other criteria for having an imaginary companion. This category of imaginary companion is mostly referred to in the research as a 'personified object' or less commonly the process has been termed 'personification' (Harris, 2000). Taylor comments that in a study by Newson and Newson in 1968 (as cited in Taylor, 1999), some but by no means all personified objects were included, leading to their estimation that approximately 22% of children aged 4 had imaginary companions.

In my opinion, studies such as these whilst providing useful data on imaginary companions, led to a view echoed in the public domain, that children with imaginary companions were in the minority and may be in some ways different from children who were not identified as having an imaginary companion. I would suggest that such views, for some years, influenced the direction of research to investigations of why these children might be different from the majority who did not. Thus, to date, much of the research has been to compare children with imaginary companions with those who are reported not to have them, on a number of cognitive, psychological, social and/or emotional dimensions.

For example, researchers have considered whether children with imaginary companions are more likely to confuse fantasy and reality than others of their age (Bouldin & Pratt, 2001; Taylor et al, 1993), whether they are more intelligent and creative (Manosevitz, Fling, & Prentice, 1977) whether they are more or less likely to be socially competent (Harter & Chao, 1992) and more recently, whether they perform better on tests of referential communication (Roby & Kidd, 2008). This appears to have contributed to some unfounded assumptions about children who have imaginary companions. Taylor, Carlson, and Gerow (2001) note that imaginary companion research has had the capacity to inform psychological theories on fantasy and reality distinction, and at a broader level, the role of fantasy in children's cognitive and emotional development. They assert however, that three

misconceptions have prevented this from being utilised. These are firstly that there is an assumption that imaginary companions are not common (and therefore not typical). Secondly, it has been assumed that the children who create them may have a 'special intelligence' and therefore are not of interest to developmental psychologists exploring typical development. Thirdly, imaginary companions have been viewed as a sign of 'extreme shyness' or psychological problems. The latter is likely to relate to the fact that clinicians working with children referred for emotional or psychological problems observed that some of their patients had imaginary companions and were conducting and publishing research based on a comparison of case studies. Thus imaginary companions appeared to have become associated with the notion of social or psychological problems. It could be argued that over time, conceptions such as those described above, have changed. Klausen and Passman (2007) note the increased research regarding imaginary companions, particularly in the past ten years and assert that 'the field seems to be coming of age'.

Implications of a broader definition of imaginary companions

Later studies were prepared to include a wider range of personified objects adding to or modifying Svendsen's original definition or using an alternative definition. Thus Taylor et al (2001) explained to parents in their research:

An imaginary companion is a very vivid imaginary character (person, animal) with which a child interacts during his/her play and daily activities. Sometimes the companion is entirely invisible; sometimes the companion takes the form of a stuffed animal or doll. (p 186)

This led to increased levels of identification of between 40-65% (Mauro, 1991; Singer & Singer, 1990). In a more recent study of 100 children, Taylor et al (2004) found that by the age of 7 years, 65% of children will have had an imaginary companion.

Most, but not all, recent research on imaginary companions does now include personified objects in the sample as a matter of course. Studies such as those

quoted above have contributed to a shift in understanding and to a growing awareness that this phenomenon is much more common than previously supposed. More recently, Klausen and Passman (2007) have again highlighted the need to use clear definitions to distinguish between related phenomena. They advocate using the term 'pretend companions' when both imaginary companions and personified objects are brought together in the research, as distinct from the term imaginary companions to be applied to companions who are invisible.

Imaginary companions and other imaginary phenomena

Harris (2000) is one of the few pioneers of contemporary theorising and research on children's imagination. He views the development of aspects of imagination, such as 'sustained role play' as being crucial to emotional, social and cognitive growth and indeed ultimately to an understanding of reality itself (the processes involved will be discussed later on in this chapter). Harris argues for the bringing together of imaginary phenomena, asserting that they serve similar developmental purposes for the child. Thus, he defines imaginary companions as one of three forms of sustained role play, the other two forms of sustained role play being impersonation and personification. Impersonation can be broadly defined as where a child takes on the character usually of a person or animal (or sometimes, a machine) for an extended period of time. Another term for this is imaginary identity.

Few previous studies have included impersonation as part of imaginary companion research, the research of Ames and Learned (1946) being one exception. There have been some recent studies which have included an exploration of impersonation as part of research on imaginary companions (e.g. Taylor et al, 2004; Taylor & Carlson, 1997; and Carlson & Taylor, 2005). As in the evolving history of the definition of the imaginary companion, there is a need to establish clearer definitions and agreed terms for imaginary phenomena such as for personification and impersonation in order to record incidence accurately and make use of research investigating similar phenomena. As Taylor et al (2004) conclude:

Harris (2000) has recently argued for a strong conceptual relation between imaginary companions and impersonation, and we believe that in future research, impersonation should be given equal emphasis with imaginary companions. However, it will be a challenge to develop a measurement instrument that makes the important distinction between the type of role play that almost all children enjoy from time to time and the types of intensive impersonation activity in which some children take on an elaborated role on a regular basis. (p 1184)

It is also relevant to note here another form of imaginary phenomenon which is occasionally referred to in imaginary companion research. This is where children create an elaborate imaginary world otherwise known as a paracosm (Cohen and Mackeith, 1992). It would seem that paracosms are quite rare, although a recent research study found a surprisingly high incidence. Hoff (2004-2005), in a study of 26 ten year olds with imaginary companions, reported that 50% also had paracosms. Some paracosms are inhabited by imaginary companions, others by imaginary animals. There is again a need to define paracosms and any related imaginary companions to aid a proper description and understanding of the phenomenon.

Other factors influencing reported incidence of imaginary companions

The variation in the reported incidence rates of children with imaginary companions is partly due to variations in definitions used by researchers as described above. Much of the research of normal populations has focused on young children, though there has been some research with children in middle childhood and adolescence (e.g. Hoff, 2004-2005; Seiffge-Krenke, 1993; 1997 respectively). The incidence rates may well vary according to the age of the child. This was found to be the case in Pearson et al's study (2001) in the UK. Pearson et al (2001) found that of nearly 1800 children aged between 5-12 years, 46.2% reported having, or having had an imaginary companion. Pearson et al conclude:

The study lends support to the notion that experiencing imaginary companions is a part of mainstream child development, being far more common among children than previously thought...Imaginary companions appear to be experienced by children older than previously

assumed and not confined to preschoolers. Generally, imaginary companions have not been well researched or understood. (p 21)

A strength of this particular study is that it investigated incidents of imaginary companions reported at different ages. Pearson et al (2001) found that 33-43% of children aged 5-9 years reported current imaginary companions. There is a noticeable decline in reported incidence with age; 19% and 9% at ages 10 and 12 years respectively. These figures however, as Pearson et al (2001) acknowledge, may be an underestimate. They noted that some of the older children were reluctant to answer the question about their imaginary companion in the classroom, with some research participants letting the researcher know that they had answered no in the classroom, whereas they later reported outside of the interview that they did have an imaginary companion. (It is also relevant to note that the definition used in this study appeared to exclude personified objects. If researchers had given definitions of personified objects meeting the criteria of an imaginary companion to the children, it is possible that even higher rates of reporting imaginary companions would have been found.)

Hoff (2004-2005) in her study of 10 year olds with imaginary companions similarly reports that some were embarrassed and spoke of feeling ashamed when being interviewed about them. One boy waited for the tape to be stopped before stating that he did have contact with his imaginary companion in the school summer break. These findings suggest that parental, cultural and societal expectations have an influence on the reporting and prevalence of imaginary companions in older children.

Another factor is that rates of incidence may be based on one or a combination of child, parent and/or adult report. Parents are not always aware of the presence of their child's imaginary companions (Taylor et al, 1993) and where retrospective child, parent or adult accounts are sought, loss of recall could affect the reliability of information provided; thus lower incidence rates are likely to be reported.

The findings that older children have imaginary companions are replicated in another recent follow up study of 100 children by Taylor et al (2004) referred to earlier. Based on other research findings, they had predicted that 28% of children would report having an imaginary companion. Instead they found that 65% of children up to age 7 years currently or previously had an imaginary companion, with 31% of 6-7 year olds reporting current imaginary companions. (The figure of 65% included personified objects as identified by parents. When personified objects are not included i.e. invisible friends only, the figure drops to 37%). Taylor et al found that against predictions, having an imaginary companion at 6-7 years of age is at least as likely as for the 3-4 year age range and assert:

It is also often claimed that the peak age for play with imaginary companions is about 4 years and that most imaginary companions are given up by age 6 when children start school. The results of this study challenge these generalizations on all counts. (pp 1182-3)

Pearson et al's study found as with most other research that more girls report imaginary companions than boys. In this study 52.2% reporting imaginary companions were girls and 47.8% were boys, and this was of statistical significance. In contrast, Taylor et al (2004) were surprised to find that the gender difference in reported incidence of imaginary companions evident at 4 years was no longer evident on follow up at 7 years. In a more recent study Carlson and Taylor (2005) found that girls aged 3-4 years old were more likely to have imaginary companions, whereas boys of the same age tended to impersonate characters. This might account for at least part of the gender difference in reporting incidence of imaginary companions and indicates that there may be gender differences in the types of fantasy play in which children engage.

Imaginary companion research in relation to research on imagination

As I have discussed, much of the research to date has focused on imaginary companions, including or excluding personified objects. More recent research has highlighted the need to consider other forms of imaginary phenomenon, particularly

impersonation, to establish whether they perform similar developmental functions as Harris (2000) maintains, or whether these functions are distinct. I would also argue that paracosms need to be included in the list of imaginary phenomenon to be investigated. I would suggest that one reason for what I see as the delay in considering and conceptualising the range of children's imaginary activities has been the lack of theory and research more generally on children's imagination in developmental psychology. Cohen and MacKeith (1992) refer to this paucity of research on childhood imagination as 'the neglected aspect of development'. They go on to suggest that this reflects 'an ambivalent attitude' on the part of psychologists and that whilst it is as they identify - a fascinating distinctly human phenomenon - they maintain that it is a challenging area to research, particularly within an experimental paradigm. The scarcity of research on children's imagination has also been commented on by others. Singer (1973) reported that:

A recently published text I examined devoted one page to children's imagination and another text on adolescence had no references to day dreams! It seems almost scandalous to me that experiences so integral to our growing-up as make-believe and fantasy can be so systematically ignored by my colleagues. (p xiii)

and Sutherland (1971) comments on imagination at a broader level, that with regard to psychology 'it went into eclipse for some years' and that:

In philosophical discussions also imagination has in the past enjoyed a considerable popularity as a topic for discussion; but philosophers often thought it a rather lowly form of activity. For some it has been associated with mere images of sense impressions; for others it has been associated with memory; but in itself it has tended to be regarded as an unsatisfactory form of mental activity, certainly inferior to rational thought. (p 1)

Harris (2000) argues that what he terms 'the work of the imagination' – 'pretence, fantasy and wishful thinking' has been very much underestimated by influential psychologists such as Piaget (1962). For example, he asserts that Piaget's concept of 'pretend play' appears to be based on the assumption that: "like

egocentricity, (it) is a primitive and temporary phase of maladaptation that will be outgrown in the course of development" (p 5).

In conclusion, I would assert that the various definitions of imaginary companions have had a significant impact on reported incidence and the subsequent investigation and understanding of the phenomenon. The assumption underpinning much of the research by developmental psychologists that this was primarily a phenomenon prevalent in the early years has also contributed to a situation where there has been a paucity of research with school aged children and adolescents. Thus until recently, there has been an under estimation of the prevalence of imaginary companions in older children. The role of imaginary companions in children from normative samples has received surprisingly scant attention from researchers. I would also suggest that at a broader level, the study of the field of imagination has been under conceptualised, due to lack of research and theorising. Therefore our understanding of the form and functions of imaginary phenomena in childhood and their significance for development and well-being is not well developed. Whilst research and theories of imagination in developmental psychology are scarce, more research has been carried out regarding aspects of imagination in childhood, such as pretence, and make-believe play. How this research contributes to our understanding of the significance of imaginary companions and developmental functions served will be explored later in this chapter.

Characteristics of children with imaginary companions

The study of children with imaginary companions has mostly been approached in two ways. Psychoanalytic approaches have been used by researcher/clinicians based on exploration of predominantly clinical case studies. Often a primary aim has been to examine what psychological purposes appear to be served by the child's imaginary companions. This research will be referred to in the section on the psychological and developmental significance of imaginary companions, further on in this chapter. Developmental psychologists mainly based in the United States

have studied normative samples, particularly with pre-school children aged 3-6 years. This research has in the main been concerned with comparing children with imaginary companions with those reported not to have them. Interestingly, contemporary research is beginning to combine the research of normative and clinical samples (in relation to those diagnosed with Dissociation Identity Disorder) which will be alluded to in this section and reviewed in the following section on characteristics of imaginary companions.

Examples of comparison studies

Much of the research by developmental psychologists has sought to determine whether children with imaginary companions compare more or less favourably with their peers on a number of social, emotional and/or cognitive indices, such as whether children with imaginary companions are more or less socially skilled, more creative, and whether they are more likely to confuse fantasy and reality. The findings have been varied and sometimes contradictory. Examples of such studies are outlined below.

Comparison studies reporting differences

Harter and Chao (1992) in a study of 40 pre-school and kindergarten children found that teachers rated children with imaginary companions as lower with regard to cognitive functioning, physical dexterity and acceptance by peers. By way of contrast, various research studies have shown that children with imaginary companions, far from being social isolates, were generally sociable and imaginative children (Taylor, 1999). Singer and Singer (1990) researched a similar number of children in the same age range as the study by Harter and Chao (1992). They noted that children who were highly imaginative, this group included children with imaginary companions, were the ones who initiated games, and were more likely to play with others. Gleason (2004a) compared peer acceptance of children with imaginary companions and personified objects with their peers. Sociometric measures were administered to 88 pre-school children. No differences were found between the three groups on social preference scores, number of positive

nominations and the number of reciprocal friendships children had. It was found, however, that children with personified objects in addition to positive nominations did also receive more negative nominations. Gleason comments that the statistical significance of this was weak and concludes that overall these children were not significantly more likely to be negatively nominated by their peers. She suggests, however, that this finding may indicate different social cognitive processes in the creation of personified objects as compared with other imaginary companions.

Manosevitz et al (1973) found that 73% of children with imaginary companions were either the eldest sibling or only children compared with 49% of children who were reported not to have imaginary companions (Ames and Learned, 1946, reported similar findings). Also, 61% of children with imaginary companions were reported as having no siblings at the time the imaginary companion was created. The siblings of children with imaginary companions were found to be significantly younger. Manosevitz et al conclude that family structure is a significant factor in 'determining' the presence of the imaginary companion. Whilst recognising that imaginary companions might serve a range of purposes for normal and clinical populations, they conclude that overcoming loneliness is a key purpose served by imaginary companions in normal populations.

With regard to older children, Hoff (2005) found that out of 69 research participants aged 10 years, 52% reported having imaginary companions. The children with imaginary companions were found to be more creative on some measures of creativity (this is in contrast to the findings of Pearson et al (2001), described below). They also gave themselves lower ratings on self-image.

Research by developmental psychologists has explored children's abilities to distinguish between fantasy and reality, and this has sometimes included comparisons with children with imaginary companions. Bouldin and Pratt (2001) carried out an experiment involving 80 children aged 4-8 years. They invited children to give a description of a monster for a story and a silhouette of a monster

was unexpectedly displayed. Children were then asked questions which included finding out if the children believed that the monster could be real. They concluded that it was individual children's 'level of credulity' that accounted for instances of fantasy/reality confusion as children with and without imaginary companions both showed instances of confusing reality and fantasy. They cautiously suggested however, that as children with imaginary companions were more likely to show confusion, they may be more prone to fantasy and have higher levels of credulity that might impact on their ability to differentiate between reality and fantasy.

Comparison studies where no differences have been reported

Different conclusions have been drawn in other research with regard to reality/fantasy distinction. In a study of 4 year olds, Taylor et al (1993) found that children with imaginary companions had similar abilities to their peers in distinguishing fantasy and reality. In a series of experiments, Harris, Brown, Marriott, Whittall and Harmer (1991) demonstrated that children aged 4 and 6 years were able to distinguish between real and imagined objects and events, even when the object was 'emotionally charged'; where the child was asked to imagine a monster chasing them (Harris et al, 1991, experiment 2). Goy and Harris (1990), reported in Harris (2000) carried out similar experiments with children with imaginary companions to see if they were more likely to confuse fantasy and reality. In one particular experiment children were asked about their best friend and their imaginary friend. Questions included which one could they really hear, which one they pretended to hear, and which one could the experimenter hear. Harris and Goy noted that the children answered all questions very accurately and did not confuse fantasy and reality.

Taylor (1999) asserts that there are different types of fantasy/reality distinction. She gives as examples fantasy/reality confusion associated with cultural myths (Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy), and what is real and not real in story books and television. Taylor found that young children frequently had misconceptions about television, such as believing that people on television could see them and often

believed in cultural myths such as Santa Claus, as they have been encouraged by adults to do. However, she found that even children at the age of three years were very capable of distinguishing between what was real or pretend in their imaginary play with others including their imaginary companions. Taylor concludes that children with imaginary companions know their imaginary companions are not real and are not more likely to confuse fantasy and reality than other children.

There have been a number of studies investigating similar characteristics to those referred to in the previous section, where no differences between children with imaginary companions compared to those reported not to have them, have been found. Some researchers have concluded that the two groups, children with imaginary companions and children reported not to have imaginary companions, are more similar than dissimilar.

In the Pearson et al (2001) study of older children referred to above, no significant differences were found on a measure of creativity comparing children reporting imaginary companions with children who did not have imaginary companions. This is in contrast to the findings of Hoff (2005) referred to above in a similarly aged sample. They conclude that 'creativity alone cannot account for the presence or absence of an imaginary companion' (p 20).

In the study by Manosevitz et al (1973), there were no significant differences in parent reports of the number or type of behaviour problems experienced by children with and without imaginary companions. Taylor et al (2004) investigated correlations between having an imaginary companion and emotional understanding, various personality variables 'and/or perceived competence' at the age of 7 years. They found 'very few' distinctions between children with and without imaginary companions on any of these indices. In deliberating on why no correlates were apparent, Taylor et al note that the group of children with imaginary companions in the study was 'a very diverse group' in that the descriptions of imaginary companions were extremely varied:

Imaginary companions do not fall into neat categories with respect to their physical characteristics, personality, function, or anything else. Even identifying the gender of an imaginary companion is not straight forward. In addition to males and females, there are imaginary companions that do not have a gender, ones whose gender is unknown, and ones that can switch genders. The diversity of this type of play presents challenges to researchers who would like to find out how having an imaginary companion is related to social understanding, theory of mind, personality or other variables of interest. (p 1183)

It does appear that children's imaginary companions are diverse in several respects, these being firstly in terms of characteristics of the imaginary companions as Taylor et al (2004) describes above. Secondly, I note that some imaginary companions are present for several months, others for several years and the cognitive, emotional and social processes involved might be different for the short term and long term imaginary companion. They may serve different purposes for individual children. These variations could account at least in part, for the inconsistent correlation findings. The characteristics of children's imaginary companions are considered in the next section of this chapter.

The diversity of children who have imaginary companions

It is interesting to note that Taylor et al (2004) appear to be saying that the children in the study were a diverse group, but then went on to describe the variation in the children's imaginary companions rather than the children. I would agree with Taylor et al and would argue that the children with imaginary companions are not a homogenous group in terms of age, or in cognitive, social and emotional development. Meeting and hearing about children, young people and their families in connection with my research has made me firstly aware of the variation in age range of children with imaginary companions. I have encountered children aged 2 years to 15 years old who had current imaginary companions. Secondly I was struck by the diversity of the children who had imaginary companions. Thus, whilst some children were reported by their parents to be highly imaginative, sociable and early talkers, I also met children with speech and language difficulties, and/or

learning difficulties, who had had imaginary companions for several years. As we have noted already, children with psychological difficulties and who are referred to clinicians also report imaginary companions. Given such diversity I would not expect to find strong correlations as has been looked for above. I would argue that this diversity has not been noted by developmental psychologists. It appears that children with imaginary companions would need to be grouped according to their characteristics as well as those of their imaginary companions in order for correlations to be meaningfully investigated. The diversity of children and their imaginary companions in clinical samples has also been noted by Ames and Learned (1946):

Though it appears that the personality type or temperament of any child is extremely influential in determining the kind of imaginary playmate, the variation here is almost as great as the number of individual children experiencing these phenomena. (p 162)

With regard to clinical samples, recent research with people diagnosed as having Dissociation Identity Disorder (DID) has begun to investigate imaginary companions, as this population frequently report having imaginary companions in childhood. As Ogawa, Sroufe, Weinfield, Carlson, and Egeland (1997) note, dissociation has been conceptualised as a continuum ranging from common behaviours such as day dreaming to at the other extreme, multiple personality or Dissociative Identity Disorder. McLewin and Muller (2006) cite two research studies on the incidence of imaginary companions for individuals with DID. Firstly, Sanders (1992) found that 64% of adult patients with DID reported having had imaginary companions, most appearing at age 2-4 years, with 7% reporting that the imaginary companion was still around. Secondly, Hornstein and Putnam (as cited in Sanders, 1992) found 84% of children and adolescents identified as having dissociative disorders also reported having imaginary companions.

Taylor, Hodges, and Kohanyi (2002-2003) note that higher levels of dissociation in adults are not necessarily indicative of pathology. They report on their research of

50 adult novel writers. Generally, the writers scored more highly than population norms on measures of dissociation, empathy and recalling childhood imaginary companions. Twenty one out of 29 writers remembered having imaginary companions, five of which continued to be current. Taylor et al report that 92% of authors studied reported the dissociative experience of illusion of independent agency (IIA), which is described as when authors had the experience that the characters in their novels were exercising a level of autonomy beyond the author's conscious control. The published novelists in comparison to the unpublished novelists obtained significantly higher scores on measures of dissociation and illusion of independent agency. Taylor et al suggest that this illusion may indicate expertise in the fantasy domain.

It appears then that dissociation may occur in children and adults and is not necessarily an indicator of problems. Psychopathological dissociation is more usually diagnosed in adulthood, though research shows that it is a response to childhood trauma (McLewin & Muller 2006; Ogawa et al, 1997). McLewin and Muller emphasise the importance of endeavoring to distinguish between the imaginary companions of those who go on to develop a dissociative disorder with other imaginary companions common in childhood. This is because, as they maintain, earlier identification of a dissociative disorder with appropriate treatment has a better prognosis than later identification and treatment in adulthood. Knowledge of the distinctness of the imaginary companions in these cases as opposed to those of the normative population could aid in the earlier identification of individuals developing a pathological dissociation. Their research comparing the imaginary companions from normative and DID populations is considered in the next section.

To conclude this section, in research by developmental psychologists of normative samples, no evidence was found that children with imaginary companions are isolated and lack real friends. Several studies show that children with imaginary companions are accepted by peers, being sociable and having reciprocal

friendships. The stereotype in the public domain of children with imaginary companions being lonely and friendless is not supported by the research. It is possible that because they are sociable, children who lack a sibling to play with, are more likely to create an imaginary companion. Most research indicates that children with imaginary companions know that their imaginary companions are not real and they are not more likely to confuse fantasy and reality than other children.

Whilst some comparison studies report differences between children who are reported to have imaginary companions with those who reportedly do not have them, there is some variation and contradiction in the findings. For example, some studies have reported that children with imaginary companions are more creative, whereas other studies have failed to replicate this. A number of studies have found no significant differences on a number of social, emotional and cognitive indices and conclude that there are more similarities than differences between the two groups. This variation may partly be attributable to factors outlined earlier, such as the varying definitions of imaginary companions and imaginary phenomena used by researchers. For example, if we agree with Harris (2000), that children who impersonate can be considered similar to children with imaginary companions in terms of social and cognitive purposes served, then the presence of children who impersonate in the control group will 'contaminate' the control group. Also, some studies rely on parent information to verify the existence of the imaginary companion. We know from various research studies, that parents do not always know if their child has an imaginary companion (e.g. Taylor, 1999). Therefore, it could be that a control group does contain children who do actually have unreported imaginary companions. Again this would contaminate the comparisons being made.

I have also asserted that that a key factor accounting for this inconsistency in findings is that children with imaginary companions are not a homogenous group in terms of age, characteristics and development. I have made reference to the research on Dissociation Identity Disorder, and the need to compare

characteristics of imaginary companions in this population with those from a normative population. This will be discussed in the next section.

Characteristics of imaginary companions

As commented upon earlier, investigating the characteristics of children's imaginary companions is not always straight-forward, as the characteristics are highly varied and sometimes can change (Taylor et al, 2001; Kalyan-Masih, 1986; Taylor & Carlson, 2002). For example, Gleason et al (2000) in a study of pre-school children found that parents reported that 43.5% and 38.9% of invisible companions and personified objects respectively had undergone a change. Nevertheless, data collected in this area has developed our general knowledge of the phenomenon and shed some light on the possible purposes served for the child. This section reviews the literature to identify what is known about the characteristics of imaginary companions, and to consider possible purposes served.

Developmental psychologists in imaginary companion studies have asked the children and sometimes the parents for descriptions of the imaginary companions. It appears to be common practice to ask the children who have more than one imaginary companion to select the most important imaginary companion to talk about (e.g. Taylor et al, 1993; Carlson & Taylor, 2005). Some studies have compiled tables showing characteristics of the imaginary companions (e.g. Taylor et al, 1993, and Hoff, 2004-2005). Thus, Taylor et al (1993) presented information on name, sex and age of the main or most important imaginary companion, whether they were bigger or smaller than the child, the colour of their hair and eyes and clothes worn. The majority of companions were reported as being older than the child.

Taylor and Carlson (2002) have usefully compiled a taxonomy of imaginary companions based on 341 child, parent and adult descriptions. They identified 17 different categories which included playmate, invisible friends or animals with 'special characteristics' such as magical powers, and superheroes. The authors state that their main objective was to compile the taxonomy, filling a gap in the

research. Their aim was to obtain data on the physical characteristics of the imaginary companions. However, the authors noted that this was just one aspect of the diversity:

We are actually looking at the tip of the iceberg when it comes to diversity. Not only do ICs come in all shapes, sizes and species, they also seem to fulfil a wide range of both short-term and long-term functions. To date there have been no systematic studies of the functions of ICs, but there are many clues about function provided by *post hoc* examination of how children talk about their ICs and parental anecdotes about them. (p 178)

Thus examples given are that whilst older invisible companions often served as a consultant or guide, baby invisible friends were to be cared for or taught. They suggest that imaginary companions act as a 'bridge to reality', that children can try out behaviours or conquer emotions relating to events in their lives.

In a more recent study Taylor et al (2004) have categorised the exoticness of the imaginary companions. Thus, imaginary companions were coded as either 'everyday types of animals or people' or 'exotic'. They hypothesised that exotic imaginary companions might indicate higher levels of imagination, social interaction and meta-communication. In a sample of 100 6-7 year olds, they found that 65% had everyday companions and 33% had exotic imaginary companions. Only a few findings emerged from this study: children previously categorised as high impersonators were more likely to have an exotic imaginary companion in the follow up study and that children with exotic imaginary companions scored more highly on self-perception and obtained higher scores on measures of fantasy engagement. The researchers conclude that this is an area worthy of further investigation.

Some studies report that children frequently chose a same sex imaginary companion, and whilst girls sometimes chose a male imaginary companion, boys did not choose girl imaginary companions (Taylor et al, 2004; Carlson & Taylor,

2005; Singer & Singer, 1990; Manosevitz et al, 1973). These differences may reflect social and cultural expectations of gender, as Manosevitz et al comment:

This difference among pre-school children, may reflect parental demands for stricter compliance to sex-role stereotypes in males in contrast to their greater tolerance of cross-sex preferences and behaviour in females. (p 76)

I would suggest that the influence of parent, social and cultural expectations is also evident in the finding that the imaginary companions of older children and adolescents are frequently not known to others or are secret with select others (Hoff, 2004-2005; Seiffge-Krenke, 1997; respectively). Thus Hoff presents data showing that out of 26 children aged 10 years, just over 50% said that their imaginary companions were a secret, and boys more often than girls said that the imaginary companion was a secret. With regards to younger children, Taylor et al (2004) reported that 27% of a sample of 100 children reported imaginary companions that their parents were unaware of, with one child specifically requesting that her parent was not told.

Gleason et al (2000) in an investigation of 78 pre-school children, carried out a detailed comparison of the characteristics of imaginary companions and personified objects. They found a significant difference in that children with invisible companions were more likely to have multiple friends, whereas children with personified objects were more likely to have just one. There was also a difference in character; the majority of invisible companions were human, whereas the majority of personified objects were animals (Ames & Learned, 1946; and Taylor et al, 2004; reported similar findings). The quality of the relationships was also significantly different. Children tended to have equal relationships with their invisible companions, whereas they provided nurturance for their personified object. This difference was reflected in some of the perceived purposes served: mothers of children with invisible companions perceived the purposes served as relating to providing a play mate (20.8%), need for a relationship (37.5%), birth

order (29.2%), and changes in the family (29.2%). The respective percentages for mothers of children with personified objects were significantly lower (3.3% / 10% / 3.3% and 10%). Taylor et al (2004) found that most older children (aged 6-7 years) had invisible companions, and that children with personified objects were more likely to be of pre-school age.

Several studies have commented on the more unfriendly aspects of some imaginary companions (e.g. Hoff, 2004-2005; Manosevitz et al, 1973; Taylor, 1999; Taylor & Carlson, 2002). Thus Manosevitz et al (1973) gained parent questionnaire data and reported that whilst children usually played 'peacefully' with their imaginary companions (81%), 24% were reported by parents to have disagreements and conflict with their imaginary companions at various times. Taylor and Carlson (2002), reported that 3% of imaginary companions were categorised as invisible enemies, who were mostly frightening or 'mean' in their interactions with the child. Hoff (2004-2005) categorised the influence of the imaginary companion as 'good' or 'bad'. A case example is given of Harriet who reported that her imaginary companion had encouraged her to eat all the chocolates from her Christmas advent calendar. Harriet is reported as having said that she would not have dared to do this without her imaginary friend. Hoff views such events as relating to the purpose of regulation and motivation. Hoff reasons that Harriet has internalised rules of behaviour, and she draws on Nagera's psychodynamic interpretation as an explanation; that imaginary companions can be used by the child who is internalising rules of behaviour to 'discharge unacceptable impulses'. Hoff views these events as part of the process of developing autonomy and following internalised parent expectations.

As yet, I would suggest that research concerning the characteristics of imaginary companions and the quality of the interactions children have with them is at a relatively early stage. It seems to me that further research in this area is warranted as it is likely to shed more light on purposes served and whether these are similar or different in comparing normative and clinical samples.

McLewin and Muller (2006) in an innovative study review the imaginary companion research from normative and Dissociation Identity Disorder populations and have usefully drawn up a table (please see Appendix 13) of distinctions between imaginary companions for both of these groups. The authors note that this is tentative as it is based on the limited research available. Case studies have usually been based on a clinical population in the absence of availability from normative samples. As noted earlier, further research in this area could help to clarify at an earlier stage when imaginary companions may become associated with psychopathology.

The psychological and developmental significance of imaginary companions and purposes served

Several theories have been used to explore the psychological and developmental purposes served by children's imaginary companions and other imaginary phenomena. Developmental psychologists have not as yet investigated the range of purposes served by imaginary companions. Recent studies have, however, investigated particular aspects of the child's relationships with their imaginary companions and others. Thus, Gleason (2002) has compared the purposes served by imaginary companions, personified objects and real friends in terms of fulfilling friendship/social provisions. Developmental psychologists have been interested more broadly in aspects of children's play and how this may contribute to cognitive, emotional and social development. Some of this research makes specific reference to children who have imaginary companions (e.g. Harris, 2000) and contributes to our understanding of the psychological and developmental significance of children's imaginary companions.

Clinician researchers have mostly drawn upon psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theory in their studies of children from clinical and to a lesser extent, normative samples. Hoff (2004-2005) has also drawn upon social cognitive and self theories to complement psychoanalytic theory in her study of children from a normative

sample. The relevance of these various theoretical frameworks in developing our understanding of the purposes served by imaginary companions will be explored in the following sections.

Research by developmental psychologists on the significance of pretend and make believe play

Piagetian theory has been highly influential in our conceptualising of child development. Piaget's (1962) theories of imitation and play in childhood were based on detailed observations of his three children from birth to the junior years. He proposed a staged model outlining how the child progressed through imitation starting in the first stage of sensory-motor activity, to the stage of egocentric representative activity incorporating symbolic or make believe play, to cognitive representation, the stage of operational activity. With regard to symbolic play, Piaget was interested to note that one of his children, daughter Jacqueline, had more sustained imaginary characters lasting over some months. Others have noted (e.g. Seiffge-Krenke, 1997), and I would agree, that some of these characters would actually meet the criteria for imaginary companions. Piaget gives the following description of one:

At 3;11 (20) she invented a creature which she called 'aseau'...Its form varied from day to day... it had moral authority: 'You mustn't do that (tear a piece of paper): Aseau will scold you.'...At 4; 0 (7) her aseau died... In a general way, this strange creature which engaged her attention for about two months was a help in all that she learned or desired, gave her moral encouragement in obeying orders, and consoled her when she was unhappy. Then it disappeared. (pp 129-130)

For Piaget this level of symbolism reflects the stage of egocentric imitation and 'distorting assimilation'. He asks of the child at this stage of development 'Can he be said to be pre-exercising his 'imagination' imagination being viewed as a faculty to be developed like intelligence itself?' Piaget answers that it cannot:

Hardly, since the subsequent evolution of symbolic imagination will consist in its decrease in favour of representational tools more adapted to the real world...In reality, the child has no imagination, and what we ascribe to him as such is no more than a lack of coherence, and still more, subjective assimilation, as is shown by his transpositions. (pp 130-131)

Harris (2000) acknowledges Piaget's pioneering contribution to the study of pretend play (in Piagetian terms, as Harris notes, symbolic play), though disagrees with Piaget's theories and their conclusions. Harris disagrees with the Piagetian assumption that pretend play is an immature period, lacking adaptation, and is 'outgrown' as the child develops. He gives three reasons for this more positive evaluation:

- pretend play occurs in later (from the age of 2 years) rather than earlier infancy, when the child has already developed a substantial knowledge of the world.
- it is a very prominent feature of child development, unlike primates and other animals – so begs the question of its biological significance.
- the absence of, or minimal engagement in, imaginary activities including pretend play is an indication of problems. Harris gives the example of children with autism. Thus we know that children with autism frequently show rigid play patterns such as lining up toys excessively and do not readily engage in play with others. Their difficulties in flexible thinking, communication and social understanding frequently pose problems for them later in coping with daily life and forming relationships.

Instead Harris theorises that through sustained role play, children imagine different possibilities which ultimately lead to a developed concept of reality. As referred to earlier, Harris categorises imaginary companions, alongside personification and impersonation as evidence of 'sustained role play' which he conceptualises as a high level form of imaginary activity influencing development.

Harris suggests that 'a major cognitive reorganization' takes place around the child's second year enabling them to take part in pretend play with others. Harris devised a number of experiments with young children to show that by this age children were typically able to take account of features of pretend play such as taking account of pretend stipulations (e.g. that the little box will be the doll's table, the handkerchief, a table cloth, and the thimble a cup for the period of pretend play, 'as stipulated into existence by the partner's remarks and actions' (p 20)). That these pretend stipulations have 'causal powers' as in real life. For example, if the cup is filled with pretend milk, and this is spilt over dolly, dolly will get wet. Here there is 'suspension of objective truth' which is that dolly is actually dry, as the milk was pretend. There is also an understanding that dolly getting wet is the outcome of a sequence of events. Harris concludes:

Thus contrary to Piaget, I conclude that children do possess a genuine imagination – the type of imagination that we all exercise when we entertain fictional possibilities. Just like readers of fiction, they deploy their understanding of the causal regularities of the real world to make sense of the novel possibilities that occur within that make-believe framework. Indeed, I would argue that the evidence from children's pretend play suggests that the disposition toward fiction is remarkably deep-rooted. It begins to emerge toward the end of the second year, at around the same time as speech itself. (p 27)

He comments that in the process of role play, the child is not just enacting rehearsed scripts, rather is enacting how characters might behave in new and different situations that the child might not have previously encountered. Harris uses the concept of 'simulation' to account for this. The child constructs a 'suitable plan' drawing from but not confined to knowledge of real world. Harris suggests that in this way, the child does not need a deep understanding of others' intentions.

Harris notes that there is a very wide variation in the extent to which children engage in role play. In summarising findings from experiments regarding false belief and mental representation understanding he concludes that 4 year old

children who had imaginary companions, an indicator of high levels of role play, did better on tasks investigating beliefs and that:

This pattern of results clearly supports the proposal that the process of simulation carries over from pretend role play to belief understanding, but it provides no support for the claim that pretend play in general promotes an understanding of mental representation. (p 45)

Thus role play, for example where the child interacted with an imaginary companion, did lead to gains in belief understanding, whereas pretend play where a child impersonated a machine, which did not involve role play, did not experience these gains.

Singer and Singer (1990) also found positive correlations for children with imaginary companions in a day care centre. They compared a group of children with imaginary companions with a group of children reported not to have them on a number of behavioural indices over the year. Data collection included observing free play and rating play style, language used, co-operative behaviour, aggression and emotions expressed. They found that children with imaginary companions showed more imaginative play, and expressed more positive emotions, they used language more and showed higher degrees of co-operation with adults.

Application of psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theories

Nagera (1969) maintains that imaginary companions serve a range of positive purposes relating to ego development and conflict resolution for the child which can prevent the development of clinical mental health problems. Thus a case is described where a girl undergoing a very stressful family situation used her imaginary companion 'who helped her avoid regression and symptom formation' (p 189). This was in contrast to her two elder siblings who developed psychological problems in response to the situation. The imaginary companion (Susan) served a number of different purposes; she expressed the difficult feelings that Miriam was unable to, examples given are 'I think Susan is very unhappy these days' and

'Susan is terribly angry, she hates her teacher' (p 191). Nagera describes this as a 'mechanism of externalization' (p 191). Nagera also describes how imaginary companions serve the purpose of 'superego auxiliaries':

It is well known that the younger child needs external controls before his superego is fully established; therefore, many young children use the imaginary companion as an intermediate step between the external controls (in the form of the parents) and their own fully developed superego structure. Such children 'consult' their imaginary companions, who in turn instruct them to control their behaviour in general or certain impulses in particular. (p 175)

Susan is described as having aspects of this super ego mechanism; 'Miriam would frequently say: "I have to consult Susan about doing (whatever it may have been that was on her mind)." (p 191).

Nagera also comments on the developmental significance of imaginary companions for very young children. He notes that there may not be a specific conflict, but that young children can feel lonely and rejected through life events, such as the birth of a sibling, or being an only child. Imaginary companions can provide comfort and friendship in these situations. Some young children frequently use imaginary companions as scapegoats for their behaviour. Nagera comments that the imaginary companion can serve as a 'developmental buffer' helping the very young child to cope with adult controls on behaviour which might be beyond his capacity and to conquer anxiety.

Bender and Vogel (1941) in their study of a heterogeneous group of children referred to a psychiatric hospital, like Nagera, viewed the imaginary companions as a positive feature, supporting the development of personality. They also draw on a psychoanalytic framework to investigate purposes. They found that some imaginary companions were used as scape-goats, where aspects of the perceived bad self were projected on to the imaginary companion to relieve feelings of guilt about behaviour. Other imaginary companions were ego-ideals, projections of who

the child would like to be and who the child identified with. Thus they describe the case of Lena aged 7 years: Lena is reported as saying:

I call a little girl Dorothy and a little boy James. Dorothy is 7 years old. She is a colored girl like me. She is good. We play games. James is 6. He is bad. He goes out and runs and knocks children down. I don't play games with him. (p 61)

Bender and Vogel in investigating the traumatic family circumstances and life events of these children and the purposes served by their imaginary companions conclude:

Far from representing a wilful and malicious 'flight from reality' this phantasy represents the child's normal effort to compensate for a weak and inadequate reality to round out his incomplete life experiences and to help create a more integrated personality to deal with the conflicts of his individual life. (p 64)

Klein (2004) draws on a psychodynamic/psychoanalytic framework including Winnicott's (1953) concepts of the transitional object and transitional phenomena in an exploration of three case studies of children aged 3-5 years from a normal population. Recognised examples of transitional objects are the pieces of cloth/blanket or toy which the young child uses as a comforter when tired, stressed or when unsettled due to absence of the parent. There is usually a strong emotional attachment to the object. As Singer and Singer (1990) note:

Winnicott's label, the 'transitional object' suggests that these soft blankets or furry toy animals represent a major developmental step away from a sense of self as fused with the mother, and from the pure narcissism of the first 6 months of life, toward a sense of self differentiated from caregivers and physical objects. (p 91)

Winnicott (1971) asserts that the transitional object takes an intermediate space between the mother and the infant, and through a process of illusion-disillusion, the

child develops an understanding of inner and outer reality. He describes the illusion stage as where the infant has a sense that 'what the infant creates really exists' (p 14) and that this is a consequence of having all his needs attended to from a responsive mother. He states that transitional phenomena 'belong to the realm of illusion' (p 14). They serve a positive developmental purpose in enabling the child both to develop a sense of self and also to cope with the frustrations of reality, where needs will not be met on demand, and to cope with anxiety in an environment which is not controlled by the child. Winnicott defines transitional phenomena very broadly: 'the thing that I am referring to is universal and has infinite variety' (p xii).

Klein suggests that the imaginary companion can be considered as a 'transitional self', onto which the child projects his ideals, aggression and fears. He asserts that this should be considered a normal developmental phenomenon enabling the child to create their own coping strategies which facilitate ego development. Esplen and Garfinkel (1998) refer to the psychodynamic concept of self-soothing, which has its roots in Winnicott's notions of transitional phenomenon. They note that:

Although there is general agreement among professionals that very young children usually make healthy use of growth-facilitating soothers, the existence of soothing (solacing) methods at later stages of development has yet to be sufficiently researched. Soothers in early childhood or transitional objects, exemplified by the blanket, stuffed animal, and favourite tune, are normally replaced by subtle and complex vehicles for growth and solace through a lifelong series of progressive psychological transformations.' (p 103)

Esplen and Garfinkel suggest that imaginary companions serve the purpose of an intermediate object for older children. They can provide the self-soothing purposes of helping children overcome feelings of aloneness and anxiety, promoting self-development.

Seiffge-Krenke (1993 and 1997), also viewed the imaginary companion as a particular form of transitional object. She investigated both what she termed the 'deficit hypothesis' and 'coping hypothesis' in her two studies of 94 adolescents (80 females and 14 males) who wrote to their imaginary companions in their diaries. Diaries underwent content analysis, and participants' relationships with real friends were compared to their relationships with their imaginary companions. Participants also completed questionnaires which included measures of self-concept and coping behaviour. Seiffge-Krenke concludes that both real friends and imaginary companions provided support and validation influencing personal growth and coping in a positive way. Adolescents in this study had imaginary companions in addition to, rather than instead of, real friendships. Seiffge-Krenke uses this as evidence against a deficit hypothesis.

Sugarman and Jaffe (1989) conceptualised the imaginary companion as a form of transitional phenomenon serving important developmental and psychological purposes. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, and in particular Winnicott's theory of transitional phenomena, they present a useful and comprehensive theory of the processes involved and purposes served.

In accordance with Winnicott, they view transitional phenomena as being very broadly defined. Sugarman and Jaffe (1989) assert that there are numerous 'developmental transitions' in child, adolescent and adult life and that:

all transitional phenomena promote the continued growth of reciprocal relationships between the individual and the environment. Such reciprocity is necessary for the human organism, which optimally adapts both to a consensually validated reality and a unique, individualized inner reality. (p 92)

They emphasise that children's use of transitional phenomena is part of normal development. Sugarman and Jaffe (1989) assert that transitional phenomena enable the person to reduce anxieties and emotional difficulties, and that in their

absence a person is then likely to regress to a more immature adaptation to the environment, and may consequently experience significant stress.

They identify four developmental stages which they assert bring together both cognitive and psychoanalytic theories. These are described as stage 1, where the infant's body is experienced as the transitional phenomenon. An example given is thumb or finger sucking as an early form of 'drive regulation'. Stage 2, the 'toddler' stage, where the object, such as the blanket, is the transitional phenomenon. By the end of this stage, use of the transitional object facilitates the emergence of a child: "with structures capable of regulating inner drives and outer tensions, and a fledgling identity as a person with his own wishes, interests and needs" (Sugarman & Jaffe, 1989: 100) and that it is the self-soothing provided by the transitional object which contains anxiety thus enabling cognitive processes to mature.

In the third stage, fantasy is viewed as transitional phenomena. Imaginary companions are amongst other imaginary entities identified. Sugarman and Jaffe claim that fantasy and fantasising have an important developmental role:

It is our contention that not only do both the activity of fantasizing and the actual fantasies play important roles in general, but they play a crucial one, in particular; that is, the act and contents of fantasizing are vehicles for the internalisation of regulatory functions necessary for the child to successfully traverse this developmental stage. (p 107)

Sugarman and Jaffe (1989) assert that there are important regulatory purposes served at this stage.

The fourth stage describes transitional phenomena in adolescence to support what they highlight is an important and 'complex' developmental stage. Transitional phenomena in line with cognitive abilities are increasingly abstract. An example given is the symbols of youth culture – music, art and the moral code of the peer group.

Hoff's investigation of imaginary companions in middle childhood.

I was particularly interested to learn of Hoff's research, as we shared similar research aims; to explore the characteristics and purposes served by children's imaginary companions in a normative sample. As Hoff (2004-2005) notes:

Some theoretical studies have pointed out different functions on the basis of children whom the scholars had met in their clinical work. However, there are very few systematic studies of the functions of make-believe friends, such as systematic interviews with non-clinical children. (p 152)

Hoff carried out interviews with 26 ten year olds from a normative sample who had current or previous imaginary companions. The definition used included personified objects. Fourteen reported current imaginary companions. Her aim was to identify purposes of having imaginary companions drawing on contemporary self theories and social cognitive theory in addition to and to create 'a complementary framework of interpretation' to the psychodynamic model. Hoff asserted that overall imaginary companions served the purpose of identity formation, where the imaginary companions served as 'inner mentors'. Interview analysis revealed a wide range of purposes served which she grouped into five main categories: comfort or substitute for company, motivation and self-regulation, self-esteem enhancement, extended personality, and life quality enhancement.

Hoff draws on psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theories similar to those described in this section. Hoff suggested that imaginary companions provided company, helping to fulfill two life span themes of developing autonomy and intimacy. She draws on Higgins (1989) theories of self-regulation to explain how imaginary companions functioned as mentors for the children, helping them to achieve features of the ideal self. She gives the case of Amanda as an example. Amanda was reported as being poor at English, which did not correspond with her ideal self. In her imagination she visited different countries with her imaginary companion to practice English:

Amanda: I can't manage English in class, no, I can't manage English.

Interviewer: No.

Amanda: But when you have one of those...pretend playmates then maybe you... go to a place and then to school and then you manage English there, then you believe in yourself, you see.

(Hoff, 2004-2005: 162)

Hoff also draws on Taylor and Brown's (1999) theories of illusion and well being to explain similar cases where the imaginary companion coaches the child, commenting that whilst this support is illusionary it none the less serves to develop self-esteem. She cites Taylor and Brown who maintain that feeling relatively more capable (rather than very much more capable) than one actually is does lead to successful outcomes and achievement, thus the illusion is beneficial. I think it is also relevant to note here the recent research of Bjorklund (2007), a developmental psychologist. He found that it was developmentally beneficial for young children to over-estimate their competence. In a chapter entitled 'the advantages of thinking you're better than you are' he comments:

The overblown confidence young children have in themselves contributes to their future success. Believing one is competent, even when one is not, frequently results in competent behaviour – maybe not immediately but in the long run. (p 112)

I would suggest that children who have capable, often older imaginary companions with which they identify may be making positive use of this illusion to develop self-esteem and to support them in tackling demands.

Hoff concludes that imaginary companions are a positive feature in the lives of children, though appears to emphasise that they have a compensatory dimension:

The ability of imaginative children to invent an inner device that provides them with the psychological and emotional support that their outer environment has failed to adequately provide is a fascinating phenomenon. (p 180)

Parent perspectives

As Gleason (2004b) points out, whilst parental reports of children's imaginary companions have usually been sought, very little attention has been given to considering the views and responses of parents. I have found only two articles which have focused solely on parental responses (Gleason, 2004b; Brooks & Knowles, 1982). Brooks and Knowles (1982) carried out questionnaires with 60 mothers and fathers of preschool children who were reported to have imaginary companions, and 40 of these participated in follow up interviews:

'Results indicated that the parents in our study did not hold very positive attitudes toward children's playing with imaginary companions. Many reported that they would make a neutral response, neither encouraging nor discouraging behaviour, and a substantial proportion indicated that they would discourage the behaviour.' (p 29)

In my opinion the method used may have influenced these responses in that parents were asked to comment on hypothetical situations which they may not have experienced, and their responses might not necessarily reflect what they would do if the situation occurred with their child. There is, however, evidence from an older study, carried out in 1973, which reports more positive parental responses to their own child's imaginary companions. Manosevitz et al (1973) analysed 228 parent questionnaires, 28% of parents reported that their child had an imaginary companion and were asked to complete a questionnaire about this. Manosevitz report that 62% of parents (primarily mothers) said that the imaginary companion 'was good for the child', with 42% indicating that they didn't think there was any effect on the child, whilst 4% felt that the imaginary companion had a 'harmful effect'. In terms of encouraging the imaginary companion, 50% are reported as encouraging, 43% said that they ignored it, and 7% reported that they discouraged the imaginary companion.

It has been noted that parents aren't always aware that their child has an imaginary companion. Singer and Singer (1990) asked children whether they had a 'make-believe friend' and then analysed 111 questionnaires from parents asking whether

their child had an imaginary companion. They report that 55% of parents said their child had an imaginary companion, whilst 65% of children reported that they did. In some situations, parents may have only partial information Taylor et al (2001). Gleason (2004b) compared preschool children and parent descriptions of the imaginary companions, including personified objects. She found agreement of parent and child descriptions of invisible friends and personified objects at a general level including the form, gender and description of the imaginary companion, and that overall there was more agreement in respect of invisible friends rather than personified objects.

I would also suggest that exploring the cultural and social values underpinning parent views would further contribute to our understanding of the presence of imaginary companions. At present there is little research in this area. Carlson, Taylor and Levin (1998) compared western and Mennonite culture with regard to pretend play and imaginary companions and found differences in the adult acceptance of imaginary companions and opportunities for pretend play. Gleason (2005) usefully comments that there can be different expectations within a given culture. She found differences between mothers and fathers in the perceived benefits of their child's imaginary companions and how positively or not, they viewed pretend play.

To conclude, I have reviewed the research of both developmental psychologists and clinical researchers in order to develop theoretical understanding of the purposes served by imaginary companions. Whilst the theories explored have been diverse and both normative and clinical samples have been considered, there appear to be a number of consistent themes arising. Generally, there is at least some consensus that imaginary companions do serve significant purposes, whether these are developmental or in response to emotional issues or trauma. A range of purposes have been explored. I would suggest that there is common ground in that both theoretical orientations conceptualise imaginary companions alongside other imaginary phenomena as facilitating an understanding of reality,

supporting cognitive, emotional and social development at key stages of development, enabling children to respond to events in their lives, facilitating a developing sense of self, and providing friendship and company amongst other purposes.

The methodologies of the existing developmental studies of normative populations have primarily been quantitative, with large samples of young children of pre-school years and up to seven years of age. These studies have mostly sought to compare differences between children reporting imaginary companions with those who are reported not to have them. I have critiqued the assumptions underlying these methods earlier in this chapter and have argued that children with imaginary companions do not form a homogeneous group. More recent quantitative studies have however enabled us to have a better understanding of the age range of children with imaginary companions and incidence (e.g. Pearson et al 2001 and Taylor et al 2004). A limitation of these quantitative studies is that we are not able to learn about individual experiences and perceptions of having imaginary companions. We do not know for example, about the range of imaginary companions a child has over time, nor of the range of purposes served. Such knowledge would do much to enhance our understanding of the phenomenon of imaginary companions and why children have them. A more detailed exploration of the characteristics of imaginary companions and purposes served is called for and a qualitative methodology would enable a systematic exploration. A study of normative samples would also serve to complement contemporary research investigating the distinctions between the imaginary companions of these children from those where adults go on to develop a dissociation identity disorder.

This study therefore aimed to carry out an in depth, qualitative exploration of the characteristics of imaginary companions of school aged children and children's perceptions of them. The intention was to ascertain how children interacted with their imaginary companions and the qualities of their relationships with them in order to identify purposes served.

Chapter 3

Methodology and research design

Introduction

The intention in this chapter is to provide transparency about the research process. The importance of transparency is particularly emphasised by qualitative researchers (Cresswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Silverman, 2005). In part, this is in recognition of the stance that research can never be value-free (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) and also that epistemological and ontological perspectives have a direct bearing on the research process and outcomes (Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

I state the main research questions and aims, and acknowledge the epistemological and theoretical influences of selected methodologies. This is followed by an account of procedures for the pilot study, main studies and analysis. Ethical considerations are discussed.

Research questions and aims

The research questions for this study were:

- What are the characteristics of children's imaginary companions?
- What purposes do imaginary companions serve for children?

The main aims of this research were to gain descriptions and understandings of children's perceptions of their imaginary companions. It was anticipated that Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of these perceptions would determine the characteristics of imaginary companions created in school aged children and the range of purposes imaginary companions served for the children.

It was expected that what was learned from the study would help our understanding of, and response to, the children who create them.

Ontological and epistemological perspectives

IPA is a methodology that is compatible with the epistemological position of critical realism. For research in the social sciences, Sayer (2000) suggests that critical realism is an alternative to positivism and interpretivism in their exclusive forms. For critical realists there is an ontological assumption that there is a world that exists which is independent of our knowledge of it, (Bhaskar, 1998), but the epistemological position taken is that knowledge of the world is only possible through our understandings and interpretations. These understandings may be diverse and may evolve (Thistleton, 2005).

Imaginary companions (ICs) are commonly recognised in western cultures, to the extent that they can be described, and sometimes shared and discussed, by children and adults. To this extent they appear to have common features. A special feature of imaginary companions is that they are imaginary and invisible (notwithstanding personified objects that sometimes become imaginary companions – see chapter 2). The IPA methodology appeared suited to an examination of ICs. The research question focused on people's experiences and perceptions of ICs. Phenomenology aims to redress the limitations of a natural scientific approach by adopting a 'human scientific approach' which enables human experience to be investigated, and where individual meanings and understandings of experiences are explored (Giorgi, Fisher, & von Eckartsberg, 1971). As Giorgi (1971) explains: 'the approach of phenomenology is characterized by the attitude of openness for whatever is significant for the proper understanding of the phenomenon' (p 9).

I did feel that it would be important to seek to research not only participants' experiences of imaginary companions, but also their understanding of the phenomenon, particularly in relation to possible purposes served. Thus,

phenomenology was selected rather than other qualitative approaches such as content analysis or discourse analysis which do not attempt to explore human thought and perceptions of experience (Smith, 1996).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

In their endeavor to understand human nature, phenomenological psychologists have been significantly influenced by phenomenological philosophy (Langdridge 2007, Schwandt, 2001). Thus all phenomenological psychologists are concerned with the exploration of 'lived experience', a foundational concept laid down by Husserl (Landridge, 2007). As Schwandt (2001) comments, a range of phenomenological psychological approaches have developed which emphasise different phenomenological philosophers and their concepts.

Descriptive phenomenological psychology is closely related to the original philosophy of Husserl with its focus on seeking the essences of a phenomenon. Giorgi (e.g. Giorgi, 1971, 1975) is acknowledged as being a pioneer of such psychological research in the 1970s (Willig, 2005). In contrast, the more interpretative stance of Heidegger (Heidegger, 1962) underpins IPA. This is because IPA has more of a concern with sense making – attending to the research participant's perceptions and understandings to inform the researcher's interpretation. Thus, IPA is more closely linked to existential philosophy for example in its focus on hermeneutics; interpretation rather than the description emphasized in the early Husserlian tradition (Langdridge, 2007).

With its focus on people's sense making of their lived experience, IPA has been prominent in health research with regard to a diverse range of health related issues (e.g. Dean, Smith, Weinman and Payne, 2005, Eatough and Smith, 2006, Mulveen and Hepworth 2006, Petkova, 2006).

As a Tutor and Educational Psychologist, my academic interests and professional practice are situated in a psychological context. Also, I was concerned with

exploring and interpreting, the thoughts and meanings of participants. I therefore considered that IPA would be particularly appropriate.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis draws on an idiographic phenomenology (Smith et al, 1999) and aims to interpret the individual, subjective experience. IPA does not exclude noticing commonalities and shared experiences. This again seemed particularly pertinent to my research focus. This is in contrast to approaches such as grounded theory which has more of a concern in developing theories from a range of research participants (Smith, 2006).

With IPA, the focus on individual experience and case uniqueness and the researcher's interpretation of this is time-consuming and typically only a small number of cases are studied. Smith and Eatough (2006) note that, whilst IPA studies which have been published range from one to fifteen or more research participants, more typically between six and eight cases have been the sample size for post-graduate programmes in health and clinical psychology.

A key feature of IPA is the view that:

Participants are experts on their own experiences and can offer researchers an understanding of their thoughts, commitments and feelings through telling their own stories, in their own words, in as much detail as possible. (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005: 20)

The researcher has an active role in interpreting participants' understandings of their experiences, this has been termed the 'double hermeneutic' (Smith & Osborne, 2003).

In my role as an Educational Psychologist and tutor, my work has involved exploring children's experiences, their thoughts and feelings, to gain their understandings and perceptions of situations in which they are involved. I anticipated that I would be able to draw on this knowledge and skill at the interpretative level of the analysis.

Pilot study

The aim of the pilot study was both to trial the child interview schedules and to identify criteria for selecting research participants for the main study. I also talked to parents briefly to obtain background information.

Research participants for the pilot study

Whilst IPA typically aims to examine small homogeneous samples, it can also be used to examine single cases (Smith & Osborn, 2003). I was aware that the nature of the phenomenon studied, being relatively uncommon at least in terms of being reported and known to parents and others, and not readily observable, meant that sampling was opportunistic and self-selected. I was reliant on parental awareness of the child's imaginary companion and on the child being willing to talk to me. Given that there is very little research in this area, and this was therefore an exploratory study, it was thought that despite these constraints, valuable data would be gathered from those willing to participate in this exploratory study. As Smith and Osborn (2003) note:

How the specificity of a sample is defined will depend on the study; in some cases the topic under investigation may itself be rare and define the boundaries of the relevant sample. (p 54)

They also comment that there is a need to be pragmatic and that the sample is partly dependent on people being willing to participate.

The criteria for selecting research participants for the pilot study were:

- The child *has* or *has had* one or more imaginary companions or creations
- The child is aged between five and twelve years
- The child is willing to be interviewed and parent consent has been gained.

The decision to research school aged children was made because much of the research by developmental psychologists to date has focused on pre-school children (e.g. Carlson & Taylor, 2005; Gleason, 2004a; Harter & Chao, 1992). Less is known about the purposes of older children's imaginary companions in middle childhood. I also thought it would be important to explore a particular age range in depth, rather than include pre-school children and adolescents, as I thought that different purposes may well be served by imaginary companions at different ages.

Participants for the pilot study were identified through professional and personal contacts. For example, I discussed the intended research with colleagues and friends. They advised me of children who had experienced these phenomena and who would be willing to participate in the research. In this way, five children aged between five and nine years with the consent of their parents, agreed to take part in the pilot study. I also wrote to all the parents in a class of 6-7 year olds asking for consent to interview their children about imaginary companions and other imaginary creations. This was an infant school I had visited regularly as an Educational Psychologist. Only four consent forms were returned. From these, one child was identified as having an imaginary companion and this child was included in the pilot study. Thus six children took part in the pilot study.

Pilot study design and response

The original plan for this thesis had a broader focus. I had planned to explore children's imaginary creations including children's imaginary companions, personified objects and imaginary identities. Therefore, the pilot interview schedules included questions to identify and explore the presence of these three categories of imaginary creation. All six children were interviewed and the interviews were taped and transcribed.

The interviews with five of the six child interviews did not provide quality data. Four of the six children had previously had imaginary companions, though not currently. They showed only partial recollection of their imaginary companions. I did not

include these children in the sample for the main study. I also interviewed a nine year old girl with significant speech and language and learning difficulties. She had had her current imaginary companion for several years. Unfortunately, her language difficulties led to problems in understanding her communications, and I therefore decided not to include her in this study.

One other child had current imaginary companions. The child interview gave rich data, and was therefore included in the main study. I concluded that few amendments were required to the child interview schedules.

It was also noted that very few examples of personified objects and imaginary identities were identified by the research participants. I had aimed to explore whether different purposes were served for the child by these different types of imaginary creation. I formed the view that there was insufficient data available on imaginary identities and imaginary worlds to explore this. I therefore decided that whilst I would ask about the presence of imaginary identities and imaginary worlds, and record this, the research would focus on the phenomenon of children's imaginary companions. As was discussed in the literature review, recent research has often included personified objects within the category of imaginary companion. I was prepared to use this definition though to record when an imaginary companion was based on a personified object.

Summary

As a result of the pilot study I decided to:

- Focus on exploring imaginary companions in child interviews
- Only include child participants in the main study if they had one or more *current* imaginary companions

I amended the child interview schedules so that the focus of the questions was on imaginary companions; however, I also explored the presence of other imaginary creations such as imaginary identities and imaginary worlds.

Study 1

Recruiting research participants for Study 1

I was given the opportunity to participate in a live interview about imaginary companions on national radio (Woman's Hour BBC Radio 4, 16 December 2005). This came about as my name is on a media register kept by the British Psychological Society (BPS) of psychologists who are willing to discuss specific topics related to their research and professional experience, with media representatives. Imaginary companions is listed on this register as one of my research interests, and my name was given to a Woman's Hour researcher when she made enquiries with the BPS.

At the end of the interview parents of children with imaginary companions were invited to contact me by email if they wished to participate in the research. My contact details were also available on the Woman's Hour website and the audience were given information about this.

I received approximately 50 responses, mostly emails, and some telephone messages, from parents, adults who could remember their childhood imaginary companions and others who were interested in the phenomenon. I replied by email and/or telephone. My criteria for selection of research participants was:

- The child had one or more *current* imaginary companions
- The child was aged between five and twelve years
- The child was willing to be interviewed

Four children were identified who agreed to participate in the research. The children's ages ranged from five to ten years. All four child interviews were included in Study 1.

Research participants included in Study 1

Study 1 included the four child interviews recruited as described above and one child interview from the pilot study. Study 1 therefore comprised of five children in total. As in the pilot study, brief background information was obtained from the parents. Child participants are shown in the table below. Names have been changed to create anonymity.

Table 1: Child participants

Research participant	Gender	Age	Number of current imaginary friends
Antonio	Boy	5	3
Harry	Boy	6	3
Lisa	Girl	6	4
John	Boy	8	1
Carmel	Girl	10	6

Research design and methods

Semi-structured interviews

The semi-structured interview is the primary research method used in IPA (Smith & Eatough, 2006) and was the main method used in this study.

Using semi-structured interviews with child participants

One of the most important aims of the study was to gain the children's descriptions of their imaginary companions and feelings towards them. I very much agree with

Kellet and Ding in their chapter on research with children in middle childhood, in Fraser, Lewis, Ding, Kellet, and Robinson (2005) that:

Children are themselves the best source of information about matters that concern them, so collecting data directly from children is preferred as secondary sources may not be able to orient sufficiently to the children's perspectives. (p 165)

Semi-structured interviews are a valid way of seeking the views and perceptions of children about their own personal experiences and feelings about topics which are important and meaningful to them. Not all researcher psychologists would appear to share this perspective. Much of the research by developmental psychologists on children's imaginary companions taking place in the USA has been primarily quantitative. This could be argued to reflect a research tradition in which:

Children's individual experience is typically not valued as a focus of research since it is perceived as unreliable and idiosyncratic. In its urge to assess and measure the child, some mainstream developmental psychology has sought to homogenize the experience of children. (Green & Hogan, 2005: xii)

It could be argued that children in the types of research study above are primarily identified as subjects in the research (Christensen & Prout, 2002) where the power imbalance between the adult as researcher and child as subject is much in evidence. My research aimed to emulate the theoretical assumptions of more contemporary approaches which respect children's views and capabilities (Alderson & Morrow, 2004) and are reflected in the growth of Children's Rights legislation and guidance, such as the Convention for the Rights of the Child (UNCRC in 1989), the Children Act (1989) and Every Child Matters (2003). Here the importance of seeking and listening to the views of children on matters which affect them are highlighted.

In fact, this is very much part of my role as an Educational Psychologist. I was therefore able to draw on my skills such as developing rapport with the children in

the research study, using language and questions that the children could understand, listening and facilitating the interaction. The first three are identified by Greig and Taylor (1999) as being particularly important when interviewing children. I very much viewed the child as 'participant' in the research. In part this was facilitated at the stage of interviewing the children because as mentioned earlier – there is a lack of research knowledge at the descriptive level of children's imaginary companions. I therefore could quite genuinely say that I did not know much about the imaginary companions and would like to be told all about them. I anticipated that this perspective would go some way to redress the power imbalance between the adult researcher and child participant (Morrow & Richards, 1996) during the interview.

Semi-structured interview for child participants Study 1

(See Appendix 1)

The child was asked general information about their favourite toys and games, and about the people with whom they play. They were invited to draw a picture of their friends. They were then given a description of imaginary friends and asked whether they had imaginary friends. If the child replied that they did, questions were asked to establish whether this was an invisible friend or based on a toy. I then asked about other characteristics of the imaginary friend(s), issues of control and activities engaged in with the imaginary friends. The child was invited to draw pictures of their imaginary friends. I asked the child if they had any likes and dislikes about their imaginary friends and whether others knew about the imaginary friends. Children were also asked about the presence of other imaginary creations.

Discussion with parents

Parents were asked to provide brief information e.g. about number and age of siblings, events in their child's life and how long their child had had their imaginary companions.

Other data collected

Parents were also asked to pass to the researcher copies of the child's most current school report at the time of being interviewed.

Procedure

Information was given to the parents about the research, and they were asked to sign an information and consent form (see Appendix 2). Thus, permission was firstly obtained from parents to interview the children. Parents were then asked to talk with their child and find out whether they would be willing to talk about their imaginary companions as part of the study. If they were, a home or school visit or meeting in my office was arranged according to parental preference. Two interviews took place in the home and two in my office, one took place at the child's school.

At the start of the interview with the child, I gave a verbal explanation reiterating the purposes of the research and seeking their verbal consent. They were invited to ask questions at any time throughout the interview and that they did not need to answer any question they did not want to. Children were given assurances about confidentiality. The use of structured activities to enable younger children to focus, rather than reliance solely on interview questions, is suggested by Harker (2002), and Greig and Taylor (1999). It was thought that offering the opportunity for children to draw was supportive. The children appeared to enjoy the opportunity to talk about their imaginary companions which may partly be because the interview provided validation, usually in the presence of their parents, of their experiences and of the importance of their imaginary companions. At the end of the child interviews I thanked them for contributing to the research and presented them with a small gift.

At the end of the interview with the child, I gave the parent the opportunity to ask questions and asked them whether they would like a copy of the summary of findings when available. One mother and father requested to have the tape recording as a memento of their son's imaginary companions.

Analysis

Each interview was taped and transcribed.

Pen portraits

I compiled a brief pen portrait for each child which included data on the number of imaginary companions and their characteristics – this information has not usually been sought or recorded by developmental psychologists researching imaginary companions. I found that this supported the interpretation of how a child's range of imaginary companions met various different needs. See Appendix 3 for pen portraits of each child. The three younger children did drawings of their imaginary companions and these are included with the pen portraits.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

I decided to treat each interview separately at first in order to be open to themes arising from the interview transcript before referring to themes that had arisen in other interviews, therefore drawing on an idiographic approach (Smith et al, 1999).

I drew upon the procedures for IPA as described by Smith et al (1999) and Willig, (2005):

Step 1 First response to the transcript

The interview transcript was read through several times and I also listened to the tape recording. I made notes on the left hand margin of what seemed to be significant in relation to my research questions. Smith et al (1999) comment that:

It is important in the first stage of the analysis to read and re-read the transcript closely in order to become as intimate as possible with the account, as each reading is likely to throw up new insights. Some of our comments may be attempts at summarizing, some may be associations or connections that come to mind, others may be preliminary interpretations. (p 220)

Step 2 Identifying themes

I then read through the transcript and notes made, again and identified themes emerging from the data – these were recorded in the right hand margin.

Step 3 Listing themes

Themes for the interview transcript were listed separately.

Step 4 Clustering themes and identifying themes and subthemes.

I then looked for associations between themes and clustered themes which could be condensed, refined and grouped together, identifying the themes and sub themes. My intention was to conceptually group and order themes, in order for the meanings of what the research participant had said to become more apparent. As Smith et al (1999) note, this involves both engaging with the text and checking with the original transcript to see that themes are representative of what was said, and it is also an interpretative process. The process was iterative and cyclical - I was continually moving from reading the transcript and the lists and clusters of themes, in a process of refining descriptive labels and themes.

Step 5 Individual summary tables of themes and subthemes.

Themes and cluster themes and corresponding quotes were then grouped together to form a summary table of for each participant, so that themes could be traced directly to what the research participant had said (Smith et al, 1999).

An example of the procedure is given in the Appendices. Appendix 4 shows an annotated transcript (Harry) and Appendix 5 shows steps 3 and 5 of an IPA (Harry).

I found that the process of IPA enabled me to focus on understanding and interpreting themes and on making sense of the interview as a whole. This process was invaluable in endeavoring to come to an understanding of the circumstances and purposes served for each child in having imaginary companions.

Child summary table of superordinate and clustered themes

See Table A, Appendix 6 for a summary of themes from child interviews. I revisited all five interview transcripts, checking for the presence of identified themes in all of the transcripts refining the categories and looking for patterns – commonalities, but also distinct themes (Smith & Osborn, 2003). A few themes that did not seem pertinent to the research questions were deleted from the summary table. I identified what emerged as superordinate themes and reorganised clustered themes accordingly.

At this stage, I asked a colleague who is also an Educational Psychologist to read and provide feedback on the interview transcripts and the IPA analysis for one child to check that there was agreement with the identification and categorisation of themes as representing a plausible analysis. This strategy was used to provide a 'credibility check', which is one of seven guidelines produced by Elliott, Fisher, and Rennie (1999) for evaluating the quality of qualitative research.

Ethical considerations

The research procedure for obtaining consent and protecting the rights and well-being of participants was informed by ethical guidelines drawn up by The British Psychological Society (2004). Ethical approval was obtained for the research which was appropriately supervised. Participants were given information about the purposes of the research, intended dissemination of findings, confidentiality, and of their right to withdraw at any time. An information sheet and consent form was devised for parents (see Appendix 2). They were asked if they would like to receive a summary of findings at the end of the study.

In accordance with the guidelines, steps were taken to protect participants. It was recognised that the phenomenon being studied might sometimes include discussion of topics considered to be personal and private. It was anticipated that children may be revealing information and perceptions that they had not, up until this point, shared with anyone else. In some cases, an imaginary companion might

have served the purpose of helping a child through a traumatic situation, and it is possible that painful feelings might have emerged in response to the interview questions. It was felt that the structured nature of the interview would help to reduce discomfort concerning what might be sensitive issues.

Time was given at the interview for debriefing. I had planned that, should particular issues arise causing concern for a child or parent, I would consult, advise and support both parent and child in my professional capacity as an educational psychologist, and would have sought consent for making a referral to an appropriate agency if required.

Power relations and reflexivity

A key ethical question raised by Alderson and Morrow (2004) was whether the research could be explained to children in terms that they could understand in order to give informed consent or to decline to be interviewed. It was possible to explain the purposes of the research in simple terms – to find out what the imaginary friends were like and why children have them. I found even the youngest children in the study appeared able to understand and respond to this.

As Robson (2004) notes reflexivity - the influence of the researcher on the research process - is emphasised in phenomenological perspectives (such as IPA). One aspect of reflexivity is to acknowledge the power imbalance between the researcher and those researched and the consequent possible influence on the process and outcomes of the research. I aimed to reduce the inherent power imbalance by viewing those willing to take part in the research as participants not subjects, and acting accordingly.

This chapter has described methods and the process of analysis undertaken. I was aware of my influence as researcher on this and will discuss this further in Chapter 7.

Chapter 4

Study 1: Child interviews and analysis

Introduction

The interviews were analysed case by case. The aims of the analysis were, firstly, to conduct a phenomenological exploration of the children's experiences and perceptions of their imaginary companions, and then, secondly, where appropriate to move to a more interpretative explanation to develop understanding of the phenomenon. Appendix 3, Pen Portraits, provides a brief outline of the children's descriptions of their imaginary companions, and drawings by the three youngest children. The names of the children have been changed to protect their identity.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis

Themes that emerged from the interviews were clustered and categorised as described in Chapter 3. Table A, Appendix 6, shows summaries of superordinate and clustered themes for the child interviews. Two superordinate themes were identified from the clustering of themes:

1. Child's relationships with imaginary companions
2. Social context

Most themes related to the first superordinate theme. The second superordinate theme was much smaller. Had I been able to seek children's perceptions of their parent's responses to the imaginary companions as intended, I think this second superordinate theme would have been more substantial. As four of the five interviews involved interviewing the child where the parent was usually present for at least part of the time, I did not think it appropriate to pursue this area.

Superordinate Theme 1: Child's relationships with imaginary companions

All children described their imaginary companions (ICs) and were able to explain to varying degrees, several aspects of their relationships with their imaginary companions. These included how they interacted with them, their feelings about them and how they perceived the imaginary companions met their needs or not. These formed the four subthemes:

- Characteristics of imaginary companions
- Child's interactions with their imaginary companions
- Child's feelings about their imaginary companions
- Child's perceptions of how their imaginary companions met their needs

During the analysis it became evident that these four subthemes were closely related to each other. So for example, the characteristics of a child's imaginary companions determined how they interacted with the particular imaginary companion, consequently how they felt about the imaginary companion and also whether they perceived that the imaginary companion met their needs or not. For example, Antonio's imaginary companion Britten, aged 12 years was 'older and taller' and helped him:

'And then Britten had to do the top of the castle because I couldn't reach.' (4.149)

Antonio liked playing with him and said that he needed Britten and that Britten was important. In contrast, Antonio claimed not to like his imaginary companion Ridey, aged 8 years. He reported that Ridey was naughty and hit Antonio. Antonio told me that Ridey was not important.

Characteristics of imaginary companions

The children gave detailed descriptions about their imaginary companions, who had a wide range of characteristics. (See Pen Portraits, Appendix 3 - the

descriptions of the imaginary companions in the pen portraits are verbatim extracts from the child interviews). Common themes are described below.

All children except John had between three to six current imaginary companions who mostly took human form, but also animal form (Harry's duck and Lisa's pony). Imaginary companions of human form showed diverse special features. Antonio's Britten is very tall and growing at a very fast rate. Two of Lisa's imaginary companions are shorter, younger versions of her real friends. Carmel describes her imaginary companions as 'tiny'. I would propose that these distinct characteristics do provide clues as to the purposes they serve for the child.

Antonio, Harry, and Lisa had several imaginary companions, each companion having distinct characteristics and ages. I would suggest that this was because the imaginary companions served different purposes for the child – these findings will be explored at various points of the analysis in this chapter.

John had only one imaginary companion but also, more rarely, had created an elaborate imaginary world or paracosm. Reference is made to this imaginary world at points, as to some extent it met purposes that other children had met through their imaginary companions and explains why themes evident in other child interviews were not always apparent in John's interview about his imaginary companion.

Some imaginary companions appeared to be completely imaginary such as Antonio's Britten and Harry's Ducky. Others were loosely or directly based on known people. An example of the latter was Lisa's imaginary companions Amy and Megan, referred to above. Some of the imaginary companions had characters from books, toys or television as their inspiration. Harry talked about the inspiration for his imaginary friends including Manager and Barnaby Bear:

'Harry: The first one's called Manager'
Karen: How did he get that name?

Harry: Because when someone looked after me after school when I was in reception, well she had a puppet and that came up as an imaginary friend and I called him Manager, that's how Manager came up to be my imaginary friend.'
(2.68-71)

'Harry: Well on a programme on CBC1 there's a programme with a bear on and that is how Barnaby Bear came up.'
(5. 209-211)

Lisa's imaginary pony Minty is based on her toy and she also has an invisible version:

'I got a toy about her and one completely pretend.'
(4.162)

Minty meets the criteria of personified object and imaginary companion.

All of the imaginary companions of the boys, Antonio, Harry and John were older male characters who were mostly capable and doing grown up things. (See pen portraits for Antonio, Harry and John, Appendix 3).

John says of his imaginary companion Tom:

'I always think of him as a teenager.'
(10. 497)

Antonio's Britten aged twelve years - is growing taller and faster than others and rode a motor bike last week because 'he's old enough'. He likes playing with X-boxes and play stations which Antonio would like to do:

'but I haven't got one. I'm too young for one.'
(3.111)

Britten can also show a mature approach to eating the right foods:

'Because Britten he's just a grown up person. When you're a grown up person you get used to salads and all those things.'
(8.352-3)

There is a sense that Antonio who has eating difficulties and associated vomiting, would like to be grown up and eating properly like Britten.

These more grown-up male characters doing grown-up things yet still sharing some characteristics with the boys may be providing a stepping stone to maturity. They may provide a male role model for growing-up and for what the boys would like to be doing.

Lisa and Carmel emphasised that their imaginary companions were always there for play and conversation. This dependability seemed to be a valued characteristic and may be in contrast to the girls' real friendships, where even good friends may be sometimes unavailable.

Interestingly both Carmel and Harry spoke about their imaginary companion's lives when not with them. Harry's Manager travels widely on business.

'Karen: Does Manager usually do what you ask?
Harry: No, he has a life of his own. He only does what I say when he's on business.'
(3.126-8)

'Karen: What is it that you like about Manager?
Harry: The way he moves round a lot
Karen: Where does he go?
Harry: Sometimes I don't know where he goes to, but sometimes I do. He goes to my club and he goes to Barnaby Bear's house and he goes shopping.'
(4.159-64)

Whilst Carmel said that she wasn't sure what Tinton and Dubbish did when she was not around, she spoke about them going to their own little school in her school and being taken care of by their parents, Betty and Sinjon:

'Because I have Tinton and Dubbish I knew that they couldn't be there without a mother so they became Betty and Sinjon. They were just there. When I wasn't around they were around with them.'
(6.247-9)

When I asked Carmel if Tinton and Dubbish had any particular dislikes Carmel replied:

'They probably don't like it when either I'm with my friends and I'm not talking to them but I'll always try to make it up to them if they're feeling lonely.'
(4.148-150)

Lisa also spoke of imaginary pony, Minty, whilst she was in school talking to me:

'She's out on the playground so when it's playtime I'm going to play with her, with Amy and Katie and the real Megan.'
(4.179-80)

Similarly, Antonio's imaginary companion Ridey has his own imaginary companion, Harvey, who Antonio hasn't met, again suggesting that the imaginary companion Ridey has some level of independent existence and will.

It would appear that in some ways several of the imaginary companions have been invested with a sense of independent agency. To some degree, the children do exercise control over the imaginary companions – for example calling them up when they need them and knowing they'll be there. Both Lisa and Carmel comment on this. For example Carmel told me 'when I need them, they're always there...I can just take them out of my pocket' (2.76, 2.92). Lisa said that Minty was very important because 'she always plays with me and keeps me company' (5.209). The quotations above, however, serve to demonstrate a context where the children felt and described the imaginary companions as having some independency of 'will' and having an existence when not being called upon by the child. The

descriptions children gave of their imaginary companions gave a sense that, although imaginary, they felt very 'real' to the children:

Carmel:

'No. He's completely imaginary. I can see him and Dubbish, they're just not human basically. It's hard to explain. I know they're there and I know they're like me. It's just they're kind of different in a way, I don't know.'

(2.72-74)

Lisa:

'Karen: What do you most like to play or do at school?

Lisa: Go outside and play with my little pony.

Karen: Is that a real pony or a pretend pony?

Lisa: Pretend one, but sometimes I bring my real invisible ponies, they are real.'

(1.1-5)

At the same time, the children in this study seemed comfortable with using the term imaginary friends - implying an acknowledgment that their imaginary companions were not real.

Child's interactions with their imaginary companions

All children spoke of enjoyable interactions with their imaginary companions. For four of the children, interactions with their imaginary companions were sometimes closely related to what was happening in their lives. Three children spoke of also having more negative interactions with some of their imaginary companions.

Activities were varied and included the child having business meetings with their imaginary companion, stroking the imaginary companion's fur, playing games and having adventures and riding a pony. I asked Lisa what she most liked about her imaginary pony to which she replied 'her playing with me and me playing with her' (5.202). Imaginary companion Britten reads to Antonio:

'... I ask Britten to get a book and then he gets a book and then we look at all the trains that come from the city, all the London trains and then I

say Britten get a Thomas book and then we look at that and Britten reads it to me.'
(3.116-19)

Carmel enjoyed playing with her imaginary companions in her bedroom:

'We make like little slides or holes in the duvet and play hide and seek or something. They sit either under the pillow or on the duvet and I make a little cage for them, little dens and we play and talk sometimes.'
(3.101-3)

John had much enjoyment from playing with his imaginary world Pinwave and he spent a lot of time thinking about this - 'Sometimes I think about it (Pinwave) all the time. It's just I'm not always talking about it' (10.467-8). He also involves his brother and birth father in games around Pinwave. (His imaginary companion Tom seems to serve a distinct function which is discussed later in this chapter).

Thus for all children including the older children, playing as well as talking with the imaginary companion was a satisfying element.

All children, less so for Lisa, spoke about interactions with imaginary companions which related to events in their lives. Both John and Carmel called upon their imaginary companions when others had made them feel angry or upset. Harry's Ducky was created at a time when he was having difficulty with swimming. (These instances are discussed later on in this chapter). Much of the content of Antonio's interview centred around sickness relating to eating unhealthy food which children ate who did not 'control' themselves and whose parents did not control their child properly. Antonio said that imaginary companion Buzzie is 'always ill':

'Antonio: Buzzie's ill today so he's not here. He's got stomach-ache. He tries the toilet but he can't.
Karen: So he's not well at the moment?
Antonio: I know why because he doesn't eat vegetables.
Karen: So if he ate vegetables he'd be better and be able to go to the zoo.'

Antonio: He's getting better but the problem is he's not used to vegetables.'

(The family had come up to London for the interview and were planning to go to London Zoo afterwards).

Antonio's parents report that Antonio has often been ill and sick partly through a problem with reflux and also food allergies. I would suggest that Antonio explores and expresses his feelings about his illnesses through his imaginary companions. At points in the interview his own actions and experiences seem to have been projected on to his imaginary companion:

'But when Buzzie's ill, if Buzzie's ill his tongue gets all woolly and his tongue and sometimes what he swallowed causes vomit.'
(7.330-1)

'Because when it's time to eat he just rushes upstairs, switches the computer on and plays with it.'
(3.102-3)

He seems to be attempting to come to an understanding of his illness. At present, his understanding is that children get sick if they eat unhealthy food and that parents should control this.

'The thing is when he's sick – imagine that this is the vomit – you can see the crisps that he's eaten, the sand, the cucumber, the sweets, the biscuits, the coke, the Pepsi, the fizzies. He just eats Quavers and marshmallows and all those things the he can't believe because his parents are not very good with him.'
(8.342-346)

Antonio at present equates being sick with eating unhealthy food. He does not yet have an understanding of the more complex concept that his body reacts to some foods, so making him feel ill and sick. The phrase 'he can't believe' in relation to Buzzie's parents suggests an emotional tone of frustration related to his real life situation. Perhaps Antonio finds it hard to understand why his parents cannot stop

him being ill when eating. Projecting eating issues and parenting onto an imaginary boy and his imaginary parents externalises the issues to some extent, reducing the emotional climate and thus enabling difficult thoughts, feelings and confusions to be expressed and explored.

Whilst some imaginary companions were nearly perfect or seen as best friends (as is the case for Carmel and Harry respectively) others were less so. Somewhat surprisingly three children (John, Antonio and Lisa) mentioned negative interactions in relation to some of their imaginary companions. One of Antonio's imaginary companions, Ridey, can be rude and hit Antonio: 'Ridey always smacks me' (4.166). Lisa complained when her imaginary companion 'doesn't stop pinching my bum' (3.103). Tom was described by John as having 'a very fiery temper' (12.574) and can annoy John and John and Tom engage in fights which become a game. It appears that for John these characteristics were closely linked to the purposes they served for him. John was able to describe both the interactions with his imaginary companion and the purpose served by the interactions (discussed later in this chapter).

Antonio appears to use Ridey's poor behaviour to engage his parents in interactions with this imaginary companion. Antonio found it hard to deal with name-calling at school. He enlisted the help of his father when imaginary companion Ridey was rude to him or hit him:

'He does doesn't he daddy and you tell him off.'
(4.166-7)

Creating problem scenarios with his imaginary companions and inviting parent intervention gives Antonio the opportunity to see a model of language and actions to deal with the situation. During the interview, Antonio role played conversations with his imaginary companions where he appeared to adapt parent models of language and action. This could serve the purpose of rehearsal and role play for situations which occurred in his life.

The apparent adaptation of parent/adult language models appeared to be evident on several occasions in Antonio's reporting of name-calling scenarios with his imaginary companions, for example:

Antonio to Britten who has been uncharacteristically rude:

'Britten could you please stop saying that if you say that how would I feel?'
(3.133-4)

This choice of words does have the appearance of being adapted from language models that parents/teachers/adults might use - the more common expression being 'if I said that to you, how would you feel?'

I would conclude that whilst some (but by no means all) imaginary companions can display unfriendly/hurtful behaviours in their interactions with the child, these may still be serving a positive purpose for the child. This seems to be the case for Antonio and John.

Carmel uses a hand gesture also recognised by other family members to take the imaginary boys Tinton and Dubbish from a side pocket when she wants to have contact with them:

'When I get them, I get them from my pyjamas, I just go like that' (uses scooping gesture).
(2:95)

This action might serve as a physical cue for Carmel to switch to the imaginary mode of thought where she interacted with her imaginary companions.

Child's feelings about imaginary companions

I asked questions in order to understand the children's feelings about their imaginary companions and analysed the responses to see if this shed light on the possible purposes they served for the child.

Harry, Lisa and Carmel felt that their imaginary companions were very important. Harry said this was because Manager guards the club. Harry has a private club which only he and his imaginary companions are members of and they

'are the only people who know how to come in.'
(3.124-5)

Throughout the interview Harry talked about the clubhouse where all the imaginary companions and himself met, reiterating that they guarded it and no-one else could get in. It is possible that this private world provides a temporary retreat from the world and other people. Lisa said that Minty was very important, because she could ride a pony. Lisa's desire to ride her pony seems to meet the purpose of wish fulfilment. Carmel said that her imaginary companions were very important and told me:

'Yes, they're like family. I don't know what I could do without them if they weren't there.'
(4.194)

Carmel has a strong bond with her imaginary family (as with her real family) who were always available to talk and play with her, and distracted her when she was lonely and is in need of company. John specified that his imaginary world was very important to him because 'it's made me adventurous' (9.428).

Antonio distinguished between his imaginary companions saying that Britten I was important because he was a playmate, but Ridey was not important because he was naughty and Antonio claimed not to like him. Britten was an important playmate for Antonio who was an only child. I would suggest that Ridey did have

significance as an imaginary companion and served a useful purpose. My interpretation here is that there is a part of Antonio that wants to be grown up and well behaved, and which has a desire to comply with parental authority and to show increasing maturity. Britten serves here as a role model of how to think and behave. This aspect of Antonio would claim, as Antonio does, that Ridey is not important to him. However, there seems to be another side to Antonio who sometimes wishes to escape from being good and being compliant, such as being naughty and rude instead. Ridey's characteristics and interactions with Antonio allow him to experience/express this vicariously. For example, it is Ridey saying rude names, not Antonio, it is Ridey that gets told off by parents, not Antonio. Antonio's claims not to like Ridey and that 'he is not important at all' (6.263) are not entirely convincing. There is a sense of fun and freedom from control (hiding) that comes across in this quote:

'Karen: Do you like him (Ridey) when he's naughty?
Antonio: No because when he's naughty and then when we'll both be
 naughty and we just laugh, we squiggle, we hide.'
(4.187-8)

The children were asked how they would feel, what life would be like, without their imaginary companions. Four of the children said that they would feel sad or very sad. Children also said that they would feel bored, lonely, disappointed, not able to play what they wanted, and Carmel said that she would feel less certain about the future, expressing strong feelings about this prospect:

'I'd feel very disappointed with myself if I'd let them go at all and I would
also feel very lonely sometimes where I couldn't just take them out. I'd
feel very sad and disappointed.'
(5.200-2)

It is clear that children's imaginary companions were significant to them. I would suggest that this was because they served a range of important purposes for the children including a pleasurable retreat, dependable companions, wish fulfilment, entertainment and play. These situations provided a context where children could

also express and explore feelings about themselves and important issues to them if needed.

All children talked about things they had in common with some of their imaginary companions. Antonio told me that Ridey 'talks Spanish and English the same as me' (5.202). Lisa told me that both she and invisible Megan liked chocolate biscuits. John commented that imaginary companion Tom liked game-boy games 'same as me and my brother' (11.508). Harry expressed this clearly:

Harry:
'me and Ducky have got flat feet and that's something in common.'
(7.338-9)

Carmel's identification with her imaginary companions is conveyed in the following quote:

'I know they're there and I know they're like me. It's just they're kind of different in a way, I don't know.'
(2.73)

Having things in common with the imaginary companion may make it easier to relate to, and feel a personal affinity to and identify with the imaginary companion. The child may imagine that as they have things in common, their imaginary companion does understand what they are talking about. In our culture and society, common experiences and perceived common characteristics whilst not a necessity, can facilitate trust and friendships, and a sense of common identity.

Child perceives ICs meet their needs

I was particularly interested to see if any of the children in the study were aware of, and could describe how, their imaginary companions met their needs - one of the main aims of the research being to find out what purposes may be served for children with imaginary companions, and therefore the children's own perceptions would help to illuminate this. In the main, I chose not to ask children directly about

this, as I had anticipated that young children in particular might find this difficult to respond to. Instead I asked children what they liked and what they did not like about their imaginary companions, how important they were and how they would feel if they did not have their imaginary companions (see Appendix 1: Child semi-structured interview Study 1).

I feel it is important to note that sometimes the children (particularly Harry, John and Carmel) volunteered views on how the imaginary companions met their needs without prompting, during the course of the interview. There is a need for adult analysis and interpretation of children's interactions with imaginary companions in order to identify the range of purposes served. My research revealed however, that children can identify and explain to others some of the purposes served, and this should be taken into greater account in future research.

I was interested to note that Carmel, but also Antonio and Harry, the younger children in the study spoke of their 'need' for their imaginary companions and said that their imaginary companions helped them. Carmel told me that when she was feeling lonely, finding it difficult to get to sleep or had no one to play with, she called upon her imaginary companions and that 'when I need them, they're always there' (2.76). I asked Antonio how he would feel if he did not have Britten, if Britten was not there. Antonio said that:

'I would feel sad...I need Britten...it's lucky I've got Britten here.'
(4.152-4)

Harry's Ducky seems to have been consciously created when Harry needed support in swimming sessions:

'When I went to Green Paddock swimming pool. I was swimming along and I was swimming a width and then I thought I would do another one with my imaginary friend and I did and I needed it to be a swimming one so I chose a duck.'
(7.307-10)

Harry (and his mother) reported that swimming was initially problematic for him. Harry reported that Ducky 'helps me swim' and asked to explain how he said:

'When he tells me lots of things that have nothing to do with me even,
and then that's the thing that helps me do it.'
(line 383-4)

Interestingly in Harry's Pupil's Own Progress Report 2004-2005, (accompanying the school report) an adult has scribed Harry's responses; Harry identifies 'my swimming' as his proudest moment:

'at first I thought it was going to be really hard but I'm good at it.'

I think this is a significant event as it suggests that imaginary companions can be used to not only support a child having difficulty but also help them to overcome the problem, to the extent that the problem disappears. Harry reports that Ducky is still around but mostly working at another pool. It appears to me that imaginary companions are not always necessarily meeting a current need, but may be evidence that a former need has been met.

All children expressed how important their imaginary companions were in providing companionship and friendship, a playmate, and sometimes taking the position of best friend, the latter being how Harry described Manager. Lisa commented that Minty 'always' played with her and kept her company. Britten participated in a range of activities with Antonio:

'He is important, but when he's important to me when he wants to play with me, he wants to build something with me.'
(4:146-7)

Again, a sense of the imaginary companion's independence comes across – Britten chooses to play with Antonio rather than Antonio controlling his imaginary companion.

Carmel enjoyed playing with her imaginary companions and also mentioned on several occasions the importance of talking to her imaginary companions in confidence:

'...I can always ask them about things, I always know they're there. I can talk to them about anything and I know they won't tell anyone. It's like they're the key or something because I can tell them secrets and know that they'll be safe with them...'
(4.169-172)

Carmel's imaginary companions seemed to serve as a more perfect extension of her real friends. The qualities she valued such as keeping secrets, being there, and trust, are very much the qualities that tend to signify the friendships of older girls, and adolescents.

Two of the eldest children in the study, Carmel and John, both unprompted, explained the purposes that their imaginary companions served and how this was achieved:

Carmel said she needed her imaginary companions:

'when I can't get to sleep or when I'm lonely and times when I'm feeling sad or there's no one to play with or talk to.'
(2.91-2)

It appeared that Carmel valued the freedom of being able to confide in her imaginary companions, having companions that are always there for her, played with her, and who would take her away from her problems:

'I just play with them and it makes all my feelings go away...especially if my mind is focusing on one thing like talking to them.'
(7.308-9)

'In other times I would just play with them and I would tell them if something had gone wrong but then all my emotions would just slip

away and I would focus on that thing that I was talking to them about or playing with them.'
(7.322-7)

These features are not always fully available from friendships in children's lives. Friends cannot always be there when needed. Also, however much she trusted a real best friend there may well be a need to censure what is divulged, and in the real world there is always a risk that her secrets may be divulged to others.

John had insight and could articulate how Pinwave and his imaginary companion met his needs. I firstly interviewed John about Pinwave, John's imaginary world, as he was much more comfortable talking to me about this. John seemed proud of Pinwave and had lots to say about it. He felt that Pinwave stopped him from getting bored and had made him 'adventurous'. John had much less to say about Tom. He told me that whilst he thought about Pinwave almost constantly, he only had occasional contact with Tom now, having had more contact with him when younger. John gave two examples of how Tom met his needs which were similar and one is described below. Carl, John's ten year old half brother, was present through part of the interview. It was interesting to note that at the beginning of the interview with John about his imaginary companion Tom, Carl commented about Tom:

'I think Tom's an anger let out!'
(11.486)

John replied:

'No, sometimes he can be friendly.'
(11.487)

However, he then described his interactions with Tom which happened when another person had caused him to feel anger or upset. John went to the bedroom to interact with his imaginary companion:

John: 'I'll go upstairs, shut the door and say pretend Tom's a pillow and sometimes I do this at Daddy's when people are around, when I'm angry I'll make the pillow jump sometimes when I'm not angry I'll pick up the pillow and make it go on my head and start punching the pillow and try punching it off.

Karen: Is it Tom you're punching?

John: Yes and that's when I'm angry and we're having a fight.

Karen: If you're fighting with Tom, what does Tom do or say when you're hitting him?

John: Tom says you're really horrible John and then sometimes when I put the pillow on my head. When he jumps up I'll lift the pillow up and I'll make it go on top of my head and I'll start punching it up in the air.

Karen: How does that make you feel when you do that?

John: It makes letting my anger off but also I'm also playing a bit of a game'.

(11.519-12.532)

John related another similar example commenting that:

'It takes my anger out without actually hurting someone.'

(13.583-91)

It is also useful to further analyse and interpret the processes involved: John identified himself with Tom – they both have the same likes and dislikes e.g. both Tom and John disliked 'brussels sprouts and tea' and both liked coffee (11:510). Tom has a fiery temper (as well as being a friend) - perhaps a projection of John's hidden angry feelings. John uses his imaginary companion to release anger. Significantly, this anger and upset is not apparent to others. Nina, John's mother described him as easy going. John's school report mentioned that he is mature, a good team player:

'He has a large circle of friends and is both liked and well respected by the class.'

(School report July 2005 p4).

It appeared that John hid his angry feelings and used his imaginary companion to defuse them effectively – the pent-up hitting the pillow (Tom) became a game. John reported that he felt better after interacting with Tom. I think there were other sides to imaginary companion Tom's personality than were evident in the interview.

John makes reference on two occasions to the fact that Tom is a friend, for example:

'Tom's not an imaginary human punch bag. He's friends.'
(13.591)

He also described Tom as a secret back-up with his brother, and I think it is quite likely that he did not wish to divulge more about secret Tom in the interview. It may well be that the imaginary companions of older children are a more private affair, particularly when they are called upon when a child is feeling angry or upset. This is discussed further in the interpretation of the second superordinate theme below.

Lisa and John particularly emphasised that their imaginary companions prevented boredom, whilst Carmel said that her imaginary companions prevented her feeling lonely.

In summary, there was clear evidence that the children had significant feelings for their imaginary companions, and were able to express these. I would assert that this suggests that they were meeting the children's needs in various ways. The older children Carmel and John and to some extent Harry (regarding Ducky) were able to explain the purposes served for them by some of their imaginary companions.

Superordinate Theme 2 Social Context

Children were asked who knew about their imaginary companions and their responses. Two subthemes emerged:

1. Public and private dimensions
2. Responses/considers response of others

Public and private dimensions

I had anticipated that some children's imaginary companions would be known to family and friends, and that other children would have imaginary companions of a more private nature (I acknowledged that my sample was dependent on some parent knowledge of their child's imaginary companions). I found that in some cases there was a mixture of both private and public dimensions to the child's imaginary companions.

Both Carmel's and one of Lisa's imaginary companions, Minty, had been known to family members and some friends and classmates. For Carmel, there were negative aspects to this which are discussed below. In contrast, the imaginary companions of the boys in the study were reported to be known to family members only. (Whilst Harry emphasised that only his family knew about his imaginary companions, I noted that his previous childminder had actually identified Barnaby Bear as being an imaginary companion). It would be interesting for this to be researched further to see if it does constitute a gender difference in the nature of children's imaginary companions. It could be that girls in their friendships are more likely to share intimacies, hopes, fears and personal stories, including about their imaginary companions.

I was interested to note that whilst Lisa's imaginary pony was well known to family and people at school, invisible Amy, Megan and Katie were a much more private affair. Likewise, whilst John enjoyed playing Pinwave with his father and brother, and talked about it with much enthusiasm, Tom was much less prominent. Both Lisa and John spoke of these imaginary companions being a secret, Lisa with her three school friends on whom the imaginary companions are based, and John with his brother:

I asked Lisa whether her mother knew about invisible Megan to which she responded:

'Sometimes, really she doesn't because it's only a secret for Amy, Megan and Katie.'
(3.122)

and John:

'Karen: So people know about Pinwave, but Tom only a few people know a bit about Tom.
John: Tom's our best secret backup.'
(12.571)

Both Lisa and John's parents said that they were aware of their existence yet had little knowledge of these characters. There may be several reasons for this. One reason for the more private nature of these imaginary companions may be to do with the purposes they served for the children. It seems to me that the imaginary companions were more likely to be private when their primary purpose was to meet the emotional needs of the child as compared to meeting the needs of a play companion, or being a vehicle for the imagination. So for Lisa, Minty was a playmate and fulfilled her wish to ride a pony. Lisa's invisible friends are a secret with the real versions of the friends – perhaps serving to cement her relationship with the girls. The invisible versions of the girls are shorter and younger, and Lisa reported:

'I've got to teach them and I've to teach them maths and how to draw pictures.'
(2.54)

This provided Lisa with the opportunity to direct and/or nurture her invisible friends, which may also have served to bolster her self-esteem and confidence in her relationships with the real girls. I would suggest that because they are meeting these more vulnerable needs, they are more private. Similarly with John, Pinwave provided creative stimulation and facilitated enjoyable interactions with his brother and father. Imaginary companion Tom was sometimes used to defuse difficult feelings and this was done in private.

Both John and Carmel the elder children in the study mentioned seeking privacy to interact with their imaginary companions:

Carmel:

'I would wait until I'm alone and at home.'
(7.315-6)

and John:

'When I'm bored I've got no one to play with and Mary's playing with something else and Mum's doing the cooking. I'll go upstairs, shut the door and say pretend Tom's a pillow...'
(11.518-20)

It appeared that privacy may be a distinct feature of older children's interactions with their imaginary companions, perhaps paralleling the child's developing independence. In contrast, Antonio frequently engaged his parents in scenarios with his imaginary companions, Harry mostly played with his imaginary companions in the garden where they lived, and Lisa played with them at home and in the school playground.

Responses/considers responses of others

This subtheme portrayed some of the responses of others and children's perceptions of other's responses towards themselves and their imaginary companions.

Apart from Lisa, children were interviewed in their homes, with a parent being present for at least part of the interview. Lisa was interviewed separately at school and it was possible to gain her perception of her mother's response. Lisa perceives her mother to be pleased that she has company and so will not get bored, and reports her mother as saying:

'If I didn't have them and my mum won't be very happy because she is very happy because she wants them to be there and when I say to her can my invisible friends come round she always says yes.'
(3.135-7)

Carmel's close friend knew about her imaginary companions. She was surprised that Carmel still had them, though Carmel felt she did not mind, particularly as she used to have one herself. At some point in the past, some of Carmel's classmates became aware of her imaginary companions. Carmel was aware of this, and described the mixed response of friends and classmates:

'Some of them don't really understand. Elisa knows about them and Jamie....they think it's really sad in a bad way having them. They think it's sad because they don't have them then it's sad if anyone else does. Sometimes I get put down by that.'
(5.213-17)

and:

'Probably because they think that because I have imaginary friends, friends that aren't actually there that they think it's OK for them to tease me about it.'
(5.222-4)

I asked Carmel how she felt about this situation, she replied:

'...it's just their problem; it's what they think it's not what I think. So stick them.'
(5.219-220)

Carmel has shown strength of personality in defending her imaginary companions – she knew she may be teased and dared to be considered different. Carmel was sociable, having good friends, and has been assertive in refusing to conform to peer pressure in this respect. I believe that her mother's very positive view of her imaginary companions is a supportive and significant factor.

The younger children in the study seemed proud of their imaginary companions and appeared to be very happy to talk with me about them openly with no embarrassment.

Carmel said that in the past she felt embarrassed about her imaginary companions, partly she said, because at one time her father had overheard her talking to them and she was not sure of his response. She has now been reassured about this. Carmel now appears to feel confident and positive about them.

I noted that John (the second oldest child in the study) was initially reluctant to talk with me, possibly because of feeling embarrassed. Therefore, on my arranged visit, I had expected only to interview John's mother, to which he had agreed. However, with encouragement from his mother and brother, and having observed me talking to his mother, brother and sister, John agreed to be interviewed. He seemed reassured by this process and during the interview told me:

'I've got so many imaginary places; I will keep you going for years.'
(11.491)

As mentioned earlier, he spoke firstly and more readily about Pinwave which was well known to the family, before speaking about Tom. I would suggest that older children are more likely, with justification, to be reluctant, and feel some embarrassment, about talking about their imaginary companions to outsiders. I think these responses suggest that social and cultural factors do influence the extent to which imaginary companions survive and are known to others, particularly as children grow older.

Summary

Superordinate Theme 1 Child's relationships with imaginary companions

Characteristics of the children's imaginary companions:

Most children had more than one imaginary companion. Some children had a range of imaginary companions who had different characteristics with each serving different purposes for the child. Imaginary companions were sometimes purely imaginary as far as could be ascertained or were based on characters from books and television, toys or real people. Imaginary companions were in one case, based on the child's own friends – taking the same names, though their characteristics differed. In this study, most imaginary companions took human form - though sometimes differed in terms of size and height.

Girls had imaginary companions who were dependable. Boys in the study had older male imaginary companions, some of whom were able to do activities that the child was too young to do. Some had capable qualities and may serve as a positive role model in growing up. Further research with a larger sample could determine whether these differing characteristics reflect a gender difference in the form and function of imaginary companions.

Imaginary companions were sometimes reported as having lives away from the child, and showed some independence of will, in one case an imaginary companion had their own imaginary companion – this may serve to increase the feeling that they are real, despite the child knowing that they are imaginary.

Children's interactions with their imaginary companions:

All children reported pleasurable interactions with their imaginary companions, with all mentioning play as a significant element of this, as well as talking to their companions. Interactions with imaginary companions related to events in the child's life such as when others had upset them, illness, and finding something difficult. Some imaginary companions showed unfriendly behaviours to the child,

and the child sometimes fought with their imaginary companion, yet these interactions served a positive purpose in enabling the child to deal with social situations which had caused them upset.

Children's feelings about their imaginary companions:

All children reported that their imaginary companions were important or very important. Most children in this study had things in common with some of their imaginary companions. It could be that this served to strengthen the relationship and identification with the imaginary companion and may contribute to the child's developing concept of self and identity. It may help them to consider their own identity and other possible selves.

Child perceives imaginary companions meet their needs:

Some children expressed their 'need' for their imaginary companions and others could explain how some of their imaginary friends met some of their needs. Purposes identified by the children included: companion and playmate, releasing anger/upset feelings, support for a difficult situation, entertainment and overcoming boredom.

Superordinate Theme 2 Social Context

Public and private dimensions and Responses/Considers responses of others:

Some children had a number of imaginary companions, some of whom were public; the others were a much more private affair. Whilst further research is warranted, it would appear that the purpose served might determine how public or private the imaginary companion is. Imaginary companions who met the need of being a vehicle for the imagination, entertainment, fun, and providing a play mate for example, were more likely to be public, whereas those meeting emotional and/or social needs, such as dealing with anger and upset, or bolstering self-esteem, were more likely to be private. Imaginary companions who were a secret with selected others may also serve a purpose in strengthening the bonds between those keeping the secret.

The imaginary companions of older children were likely to be more private. Older children mentioned seeking privacy to interact with their imaginary companions. This may well reflect actual or anticipated perceived parent and peer responses. Thus, social and cultural factors are likely to influence the existence of imaginary companions, particularly in older childhood, and how far they are public or private. Future research and sampling needs to acknowledge that imaginary companions are around in later childhood, though might not be known to others.

Discussion of the analysis of Study 1 child interviews.

Superordinate Theme 1 Child's relationships with ICs

Characteristics of imaginary companions

In this study, children's imaginary companions started to emerge mostly between the ages of two and three years, meeting their needs for company mostly at a time when there was not a similar aged sibling to play with. This finding has been replicated in a number of other studies (e.g. Gleason, Sebanc, & Hartup, 2000; Manosevitz et al, 1973; Singer & Singer, 1990; Taylor, 1999). Singer and Singer (1990) suggest that in these situations the imaginary companion may serve compensatory and adaptive purposes, and provide opportunities for the child to engage in 'practicing imagery and conversation' (p 100).

Most of the children had a range of imaginary companions, with different characteristics and, I have argued, with a range of purposes being served. The characteristics of the imaginary companions were interestingly diverse as has been commented on in other research (Hoff, 2004-2005, Taylor et al 2001; Nagera, 1969).

The boys in my research had imaginary companions which included older male, competent role models which they appeared to admire. Singer and Singer (1990) view this type of imaginary companion as compensatory. They hypothesise that:

Initially, such compensatory figures may be merely for consolation, but over time they may also provide the child with modelling opportunities for trying out new physical or social arts or creating new and more interesting games. (p 108)

It is also possible that having the illusion of having a competent older friend who in some ways is similar to yourself, promotes self-esteem, confidence and a sense of competence. As discussed in Chapter 2, Sugarman and Jaffe (1989) outline a developmental continuum of transitional phenomena. They suggest that imaginary companions are representative of fantasy transitional phenomena at stage 3. Sugarman and Jaffe assert that the use of fantasy at this stage facilitates complex cognitive reorganisation which leads to the internalisation of 'regulatory functions' thus developing the self. Narcissistic regulation describes the process that serves to improve self-esteem. Sugarman and Jaffe view the creation of imaginary companions with admired characteristics (such as was found in my study referred to above), as part of this process of developing self-esteem.

Two of the boys in my study had imaginary companions who served the purpose of self-regulation. This concept is comparable to Sugarman and Jaffe's concept of drive regulation. Thus John in my study, to defuse the tension when he felt angry with a peer, had a fight with his imaginary companion which ended up in a game and he felt better. Sugarman and Jaffe also view the development of the superego as a regulatory function facilitated through fantasy. They give as examples of these processes; the imaginary companion provides approval of the child, until this can be internalised. At other times, unwanted features of the self are 'externalised' on to the imaginary companion, thus protecting a concept of the self as good. Antonio's interactions with Ridey, who can be naughty and rude, and John's interactions with an angry Tom seem to illustrate the latter process of 'externalisation'.

Imaginary companions of some of the children in my research appeared to show some level of independence. They were reported to have lives away from the children and one had his own imaginary companion. Other research has commented on these aspects, e.g. Taylor (1999). These features contributed to a sense of the imaginary companion as having an air of reality. Whilst some might view this phenomenon as suggestive of fantasy/reality confusion, this would not appear to be the case. The children in the study knew that their imaginary companions were pretend, yet they appeared very real to the children. As discussed in chapter 2, most studies reveal that even young children have little difficulty in identifying what is real and what is pretend in their play with others, or where the fantasy is under their control (Taylor, 1999). As the work of Harris (2000) and Dunn (2004) shows, from the age of 2.6 years, children are frequently engaged in games of pretend, which involve an agreement of what is pretend and for how long. In this way they can be seen to be having the experiences of and practising fantasy/reality distinction. This is discussed further in the next section.

Child's interactions with their imaginary companions

All children used their interactions with their imaginary companions to respond to life events and to have fantasy adventures as well. It seems possible that responding to life events while in play/fantasy mode provides a safer non-threatening environment to explore and experiment with ideas and feelings.

All the children in the current study talked about enjoyable and fulfilling interactions with their imaginary companions. All emphasised play with the imaginary companions. In my view, the emphasis given to play by all the children including the older ones in the study is because play is a developmental phenomenon with 'adaptive functions' in terms of learning, co-operation and socialisation (Bjorklund, 2007). Whilst playing, important purposes were being served. As we have seen in Chapter 2, Harris (2000) asserts that sustained role play (imaginary companions being one of three forms of sustained role play) is of much importance in the

cognitive, social and emotional development of the child. Harris concludes that not only does this type of imaginative play with others enable children to imagine 'possible worlds' but also that children:

draw to a remarkable extent on the causal understanding of the physical and mental world that they have already built up during infancy. Thus, in pretence, young children may step back from current reality, or go beyond it, but that does not entail any cognitive distortion of the general principles by which reality operates. (Harris, 2000: 6)

Earlier, Winnicott (1971), whilst describing different theoretical structures, came to similar conclusions. The importance ascribed to play in enabling children to creatively reach an understanding of reality is one of the main themes of his book; 'Playing and reality'. Winnicott asserts that this process continues into adulthood:

It is assumed here that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience....This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is 'lost' in play. (p 13)

It seems to me that in my study children's interactions including play with their imaginary companions did bring relief from their encounters in the world. Relief was brought about by for example, being able to express difficult or confused feelings in a safe space and the imaginary companions providing an enjoyable distraction from upsets with others.

Both Harris and Winnicott note the very wide variation in children's engagement in play and that it is when children are not able to engage in imaginative play that there should be concern. Winnicott (1971) maintains "there is direct development from transitional phenomena to playing, and from playing to shared playing, and from this to cultural experiences" (p 51). Winnicott defines cultural experiences as being the 'potential space between the individual and the environment (originally the object).' As noted in Chapter 2, Winnicott's conceptualisation of transitional

phenomena is very broad, and others have conceptualised imaginary companions as transitional phenomenon (e.g. Sugarman & Jaffe, 1989; Seiffge-Krenke, 1997).

I have discussed play here in the context of developing cognitive, emotional and social skills and gaining experience in fantasy/reality boundaries. Significantly, Winnicott (1971) also raises our awareness of the importance of play in developing the sense of self:

It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self. (p 54)

Thus play including play with imaginary companions can be seen to fulfil a broad range of functions fostering development and self identity.

It was interesting to note that three children in the study reported unfriendly behaviours from some of their imaginary companions. My analysis revealed however, that in each case, the unfriendly behaviours formed part of serving an overall positive purpose e.g. helping the child express angry feelings safely and to explore feelings and issues regarding name-calling and bullying. Hoff (2004-2005) similarly viewed the imaginary companions 'bad influence' and related negative behaviours as serving useful functions of 'self-regulation' for the child. Thus it would appear that what might be viewed as unfriendly or negative behaviours from the imaginary companion still serve useful developmental and emotionally supportive purposes for children from non-clinical populations. This may constitute an important distinction from the imaginary companions of people from specific clinical populations.

Child's feelings about their imaginary companions

Most of the children said that their imaginary companions were important or very important to them and that they would be very much missed if they were not around. One child in particular, Carmel, felt that she didn't know how she would

manage without them. I have asserted that the strong feelings of importance that the children had for their imaginary companions signified that the imaginary companions were serving useful purposes for the children. Children's perceptions of how their imaginary companions met their needs is discussed further in the next section. It is relevant to note here, that not all imaginary companions were seen as important. Thus, Antonio reported that Britten was important because he was a playmate, whilst Ridey was viewed as not important because he was naughty. It would appear that Antonio's reports of how important the imaginary companion was to him was based on an awareness of some of the purposes served e.g. to have a playmate. (My interpretation has argued that the apparent negative characteristics of some imaginary companions also may serve a developmental or emotionally supportive purpose). Children's feelings of the importance of their imaginary companion may be associated with purposes served and frequency of contact. Thus four of the children had frequent contact with their imaginary companions, they served useful purposes for the child and were seen by them as important, or very important. Whilst John had very frequent thoughts about his imaginary world Pinwave, which he reported had made him adventurous and is described as very important, he had less contact than previously with imaginary companion Tom who is not described as very important. As we have seen, one of the purposes served by Tom, was to help John defuse angry feelings when others had upset him. I would suggest that John had less frequent contact with Tom because he had developed other ways of managing his angry feelings. Tom was no longer required to meet certain purposes, hence there was less frequent contact and Tom was not perceived to be important to John.

All children in this study mentioned having something in common, having similar characteristics, with at least one of their imaginary companions. I was interested to note that Gleason (2004b) reported similarly on research carried out by Mauro (1991) where children reported that their imaginary companion was like them on a number of personality traits. I have suggested that identifying with the imaginary companion in this way might serve different though related purposes. Firstly,

perceived similarities with others do provide a stepping stone to friendship (Dunn, 2004; Roffey et al, 1994). Therefore, a child's perceived similarities with their imaginary companion may be a way of developing a connection and friendship with them and help them to feel that their imaginary companion understands them. It may also serve the purpose of developing self-esteem and self-concept; most children genuinely valued their imaginary companions and said that they were important to them. Identifying similarities with their valued imaginary companion may serve to enhance their own sense of worth and self-esteem, particularly if the imaginary companion also has admired qualities, perhaps in the form of an ideal self to which a child might aspire. It would be interesting to see if children share similar characteristics with personified objects.

Child's perceptions of how imaginary companions met their needs

All children identified friend and playmate as a main purpose being served. This has commonly been found to be the case in other research (e.g. Gleason et al, 2000; Kalyan-Masih, 1986; Manosevitz et al, 1973; Ames & Learned, 1946). This is in contrast to the perceived purposes of personified objects which were not always perceived to be primarily companions (e.g. Gleason et al, 2000).

All children in Study 1 highlighted the friendship quality of their imaginary companions. Mostly imaginary companions were reported as being good friends, liked playing with the child, and were, in some cases, someone in whom to confide and share secrets. Interestingly, Gleason and Hohmann's research (2006) of 84 pre-school children found that imaginary friends were perceived by the children to offer similar 'provisions' as their real friends. Children were questioned using the Social Provisions Questionnaire about what they saw as the 'social provisions' offered by different types of friendship. Gleason and Hohmann defined social provisions as companionship, attachment or intimacy, availability, affection and 'enhancement or worth'. They had derived these from the work of Furman and Buhrmester (1985) and Weiss (1974). Different types of friendship included were reciprocal friendships, imaginary companions where the children were reported to

have them, non-friends, and unilateral friends. Unilateral friends which were reported to be more typical of young children's relationships were defined as where the child perceived someone to be a friend, but where the friendship is not reciprocated. Gleason and Hohmann reported that both real friends and imaginary companions were perceived to offer the highest levels of social provisions. Thus in terms of purposes served, imaginary companions fulfill similar purposes to their real friends

My analysis certainly revealed that children did use their imaginary companions to respond to a range of events or problems going on in their lives, and in some cases to express feelings and explore personal issues and this seemed to be beneficial for them. Some of the children were able to articulate how their imaginary friends helped and supported them. I noticed that both John and Carmel the older children in my study articulated how they interacted with their imaginary friends to enable uncomfortable feelings to disappear.

Hoff's research demonstrated that older children do have insights into some of the purposes served by their own imaginary companions, as was found to be the case in my study. Hoff herself reports that she found it 'remarkable' that despite children being aware that the imaginary companions were not real:

children still contended that their companions assumed active parts in all the observed supportive and coaching functions. They obviously experienced that it was easier to achieve different objectives with imaginary support. (p 174)

As discussed in Chapter 2, Hoff draws on theories of positive illusion in adults to explore this (Taylor & Brown, 1999).

Hoff (2004-2005) poses the questions:

Might imaginary companions be an indication that too large a burden of responsibility is placed on too small children? Or should imaginary companions be considered normal transition objects providing alleviation in a developmental shift? It was obvious that many children needed extra help until they could grow into their oversized clothes. Having imaginary help was better than no help. (p 174)

In response to the questions posed by Hoff, I would respond that imaginary companions are often a normal developmental phenomenon and can be considered a positive influence (Harris, 2000). I would also acknowledge that children with imaginary companions are not a homogeneous group and that children with psychological difficulties, who have faced trauma and have imaginary companions, may have developed these in response to these circumstances as a coping strategy.

Superordinate Theme 2: Social context

Public and private dimensions of imaginary companions/Considers the responses of others

I have combined the discussion of these subthemes as they were very much interrelated. The younger children in the study were mostly proud of their imaginary companions and appeared to talk about them quite openly. They also interacted with their imaginary companions in different locations. At this early stage of development, parents are more aware and sometimes involved in their child's play – observing, initiating play, including pretend play, joining in and intervening if there are problems. Thus, they are likely to have some awareness of where their child has an imaginary companion. I would also suggest that in this context children will be sensitive to parent expectations of what is considered appropriate play, including pretend play and play with imaginary companions.

Singer and Singer (1990) identified parent support and encouragement of the imaginary companion as one of a list of necessary requisites for the presence of imaginary companions. It needs to be recognised that cultural and social factors are very likely to underpin parent values. Thus, Carson, Taylor and Levin (1998)

comment that pretend play, including play with imaginary companions, is valued in western cultures such as America. Their research of another culture, the Mennonites, found that pretend play, including play with imaginary companions, was less likely to be encouraged and differences in the type and amount of pretend play were found as a consequence of cultural values and opportunities provided for play.

It is also relevant to note that within cultures there appear to be different expectations based on the gender of the parent. Gleason (2005) found that 73 American mothers of pre-school children with a mean age of four and a half years showed a more positive view of pretend play as compared with 40 fathers, who would set more limits on pretend play. This might be related to parent differences in perceived benefits. Gleason found that the mothers of children with reported imaginary companions were more likely to see pretend play as benefiting language, whereas fathers were more likely to view the benefit as relating to social development.

I have suggested that the younger children were more open about their imaginary companions because of being in a social context which valued pretend play and accepted imaginary companions as part of this. The imaginary companions of the older children were a more private affair. It is significant to note that there are very few studies of older children with imaginary companions, and two recent studies have noted the reticence of some of the children to talk to researchers about their experiences as in the current study and the studies of Hoff (2004-2005) and Pearson et al (2001). My own study also suggested that where the imaginary companions are meeting more emotional and/or social needs they are more likely to be private. Nagera (1969) expressed similar views.

Chapter 5

Study 2: Child interviews and analysis

This chapter provides a critique of Study 1 and describes the rationale and design of Study 2. An analysis and discussion of the three child interviews comprising Study 2 is given.

Methodological critique of child interviews Study 1 and rationale for Study 2

There were limitations to Study 1. This was mainly in terms of the homogeneity of research participants, a principle of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2003). There was a wide age range of children in the study (between five and ten years). It could be expected that there might be different purposes served according to the age and developmental maturity of the child. Also, Study 1 identified differences in the characteristics of imaginary companions (ICs) and in purposes served which may have been influenced by gender. The original sample was neither of a size, nor the methodology chosen appropriate to explore this. An additional variable was that Study 1 included a family of mixed ethnicity.

In order to adhere more closely to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis guidelines (Smith & Osborn, 2003), Study 2 was designed to investigate children with imaginary companions who were similar in terms of age, gender, and ethnicity.

Research design Study 2

The aim of Study 2 was to interview a small number of older children who had current imaginary companions and who were willing to be interviewed. Children were identified via a questionnaire completed by all children in two Year 6 classes.

Parent information and consent

The Head Teacher of a state primary school in a London borough agreed for children in Year 6 to participate in the study and a letter was sent home to all parents of the two Year 6 classes in the school (see Appendix 7). Parents were given brief information about the purposes of the research and how the research was to be conducted. They were asked to complete and send back a reply slip if they did not wish their child to participate. Four parents replied indicating that they did not wish their child to participate. Children of these parents took part in other activities outside of the classroom when the research was being explained and the children completed the questionnaires.

Imaginary Friends Questionnaire

An Imaginary Friends Questionnaire was devised (see Appendix 8). The purpose of the questionnaire was to establish the age and gender of the child, whether the child could recall previous imaginary friends and whether they had current imaginary friends. Children were asked to indicate whether they would be willing to be interviewed about their imaginary friends.

Procedure for administering the questionnaire

I visited both classes and explained about the purposes of the research. I distributed a questionnaire and envelope to each child. I asked the children to put their completed questionnaire into an envelope which I collected when the children had finished.

Questionnaire Responses

Six girls and one boy reported current imaginary companions. This boy indicated on the questionnaire that he did not wish to be interviewed. All six girls were interviewed.

Semi-structured interviews

The child semi-structured interview schedule for Study 1 was amended in several ways (see Appendix 9, Amended child semi-structured interview). Language was changed to reflect that older children, not younger children were to be interviewed. More information was given in the introduction to the children about informed consent, their right to withdraw and confidentiality.

In the 'Views of others' section questions were added to, to ask not only what others said and did in relation to knowledge of the imaginary friend, but also about the child's perceptions of what others thought about the imaginary friend. For children whose imaginary friends were mostly a private affair, children were asked what others might say or think about it if they knew (question 15).

Procedure for conducting interviews

Interviews took place at the school in a room which was free from interruptions. Interviews were tape recorded with the consent of the research participants.

Selection of research participants and interviews for analysis.

Three of the six research participants were from diverse ethnic origins and thus their interviews were not included in the homogenous sample. I had decided to interview all six participants firstly as I thought that ethical issues would be raised by selecting participants according to ethnicity at an earlier stage. Secondly, it was anticipated that I would make use of these interviews in further research. The three research participants used for the homogenous sample were all similarly aged girls (11 years) with current imaginary friends who were of the same ethnic group (White British). They were named Holly, Tara and Ella. Names have been changed to ensure confidentiality. The class teacher confirmed that these children did not have special educational or mental health needs.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of child interviews: Study 2

The interviews were transcribed by the researcher (see Appendix 10 for the annotated interview transcript for Holly). Transcripts were analysed case by case and integrated as in Study 1. I aimed to identify and discuss both similar themes across the interviews, as well as themes which were specific to individual interviews. A colleague read the three interview transcripts and steps three and five of the IPA and gave feedback on the categorisation of themes, thus providing a 'credibility check' (Elliott, Fisher and Rennie (1999)).

Three superordinate themes emerged. These and their cluster themes are summarised in the diagram on the next page and in Table B: A Summary List of Superordinate and Clustered Themes from Child Interviews (Appendix 12).

I shall provide an analysis of each Superordinate theme and cluster themes in turn.

Superordinate Theme 1: Characteristics of ICs

The girls described their current and previous imaginary companions. Three subthemes emerged concerning the characteristics of the imaginary companions:

- Positive characteristics
- Negative characteristics
- Imaginary companions seem real

The girls had both human and animal imaginary companions. As an exploration of the characteristics of imaginary companions was one of the two specific research foci, I have provided a table, Table 1, on page 112, which shows the characteristics of ICs for each research participant, including those summarised in the cluster themes above and outlined in Figure 1, page 111.

Figure 1 Diagram of Superordinate and clustered themes

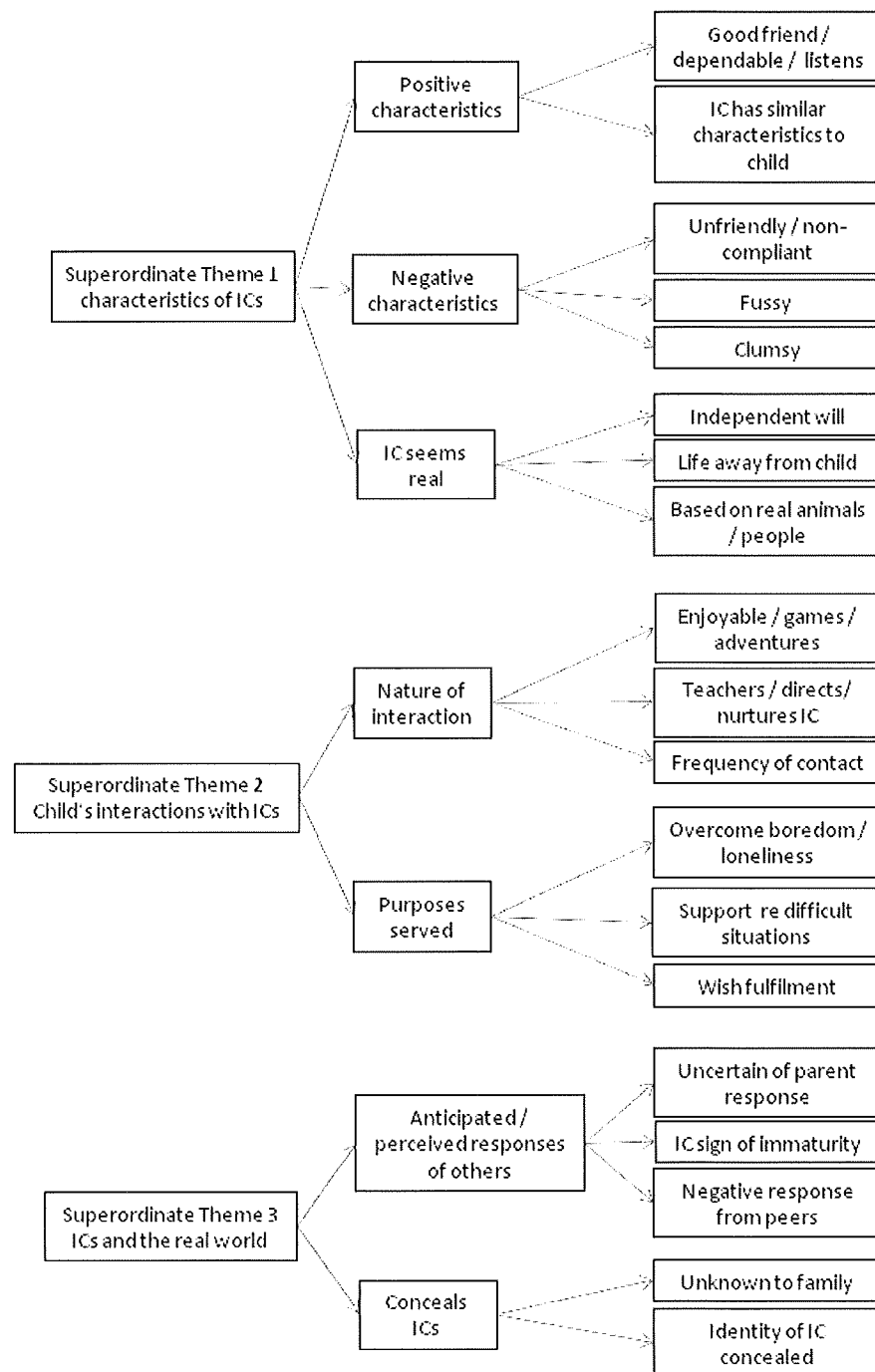


Table 1: Characteristics of ICs

Key: use of *italics* denotes previous not current ICs

Child	Animal/ Name	Human/ Name	Gender/Age	Positive Page/line no	Negative Page/line no	IC seems real Page/ line no
Holly	pony Dream		Female	dependable 2.47	fussy 4.148	independent will 3.123
				listens 4.144	non compliant 4.154	has life away from child 4.136
	<i>puppy Jasper</i>		<i>male</i>		<i>clumsy 5.219</i>	<i>based on real animals 7.307</i>
	<i>puppy Dora</i>		<i>Female</i>			" "
		<i>twin Lily</i>	<i>female 11yrs</i>	<i>similar 6.228</i>		
Tara	horse Fantazia		female 18yrs	friendly 2.74	non compliant 4.160	based on real animals 3.100
	horse Tom		male 17 yrs	dependable 2.56	" " 2.85	" "
		<i>Ricky</i>	<i>female/male</i>			
		<i>Sophie</i>	<i>female 11yrs</i>		<i>unfriendly 10.425</i>	<i>own lives 10.429</i>
		<i>Annie</i>	<i>female older</i>		<i>unfriendly 9.405</i>	<i>based on real people 9.369</i>
Ella		Polly	female 11yrs	friendly 1.8		has life away from child 3.117
				dependable 2.79		based on real person 2.46
				similar 1.30		Independent will 2.74-6

Holly and Tara recalled current and also previous ICs that they had when they were aged four, and two to four years respectively. Ella has had Polly her current imaginary companion since the age of three or four. Thus all girls have had the experience of having imaginary companions over approximately seven years - a significant proportion of their lives.

Positive characteristics

Throughout the interviews, the girls frequently commented on the positive characteristics of their imaginary companions, such as their friendliness, dependability and trustworthiness and listening skills. Thus Tara described imaginary horses Fantazia and Tom as:

‘they’re both really friendly.’

(2.74)

and similarly, Ella said of imaginary companion Polly:

‘Polly is a quite sweet friend.’

(1.8)

All girls commented that the imaginary companions were dependable; being always available and trustworthy. These are important qualities that I would suggest cannot be fully replicated in the real world in that even parents and best friends cannot always be available and depended upon in the way that an imaginary companion can. Thus Holly told me how Dream her current imaginary pony was dependable:

‘Karen: So if you want to have contact with Dream – do you have to wait for Dream to contact you or can you just think ‘I want to see Dream now’ and then you see her?

Holly: I always imagine she’s next to me if I want her, so I can just talk to her.’

(1.44-2.48)

Similarly, in answer to my question to Tara of where Fantazia and Tom, her current imaginary horses lived, Tara replied:

'They don't really – when I want them to exist they're there but they don't – I don't turn them out into a field or anything.'
(2.56)

Ella's imaginary companion Polly was also readily available:

'she normally stays at home waiting for me.'
(3.102)

Taking an interest in the child and listening were also valued qualities. When I asked Holly what she most liked about Dream she replied:

'her listening skills.'
(4.144)

It was clear that not only did Dream listen to Holly, when Holly did talk to Dream, Dream could be relied on to take Holly's side:

Holly: Well if I'm angry at someone she's not going to say anything back – she'll just listen.

Karen: Hmm

Holly: And she'll always be on my side. My sister, if I have an argument with her – she'll always agree with me and not my sister – she won't come back at me.'
(2.76-82)

Ella commented on Polly's capacity for giving undivided attention:

'And when I talk to her she's very interested all the time.'

(2.71)

When I asked Tara what she liked most about Fantazia and Tom she replied:

'Tara: Umm (pause) Well both of them I'd say I can trust them.

Karen: What do you mean when you say you can trust them – what with?

Tara: Like if I tell them a secret it's not like they can tell anyone.

Karen: Yes

Tara: Cos they're horses – so like they can keep secrets...'

(6.262-4)

Thus in all interviews there was a strong sense that the imaginary companions were very friendly, took an interest and had a special relationship with the child, mostly being dependable and trustworthy. These very positive qualities appeared to be highly valued and appreciated by the girls.

Ella and Holly had both shared similar characteristics with their imaginary companions. Holly spoke of Lily, her first imaginary companion, when she was approximately 4-6 years old. Holly feels that Lily was more special than the others. Holly described Lily as having similar characteristics in that she was her twin. Holly seemed to hold this view despite the fact that she gave Lily a preferred hair and eye colour which was not similar. Perhaps having a sense of a very similar identity with her imaginary twin enabled her to vicariously experience, for example, desired physical characteristics which were not shared:

'Karen: Did she (Lily) look like you?

Holly: Yes but she had blue eyes and blond hair

Karen: Yes

Holly: So when I was young I wanted blond hair because everybody said blond hair was really good so I made her have blond hair and blue eyes and she was exactly like me. I have a cocker spaniel so she had a cocker spaniel.'

(5.225-6.229)

This quote also appears to illustrate Holly's awareness even at a young age of social and cultural perceptions of attractiveness and her desire to meet the required criteria.

Ella shares several similar characteristics with Polly:

'Well she's the same height as me and erm she is the same hair colour as me – because I'm very different, cos in my family they all have blond hair and black brown hair – so she has the same coloured hair as me and her personality is that she's very nice and kind.'
(1.30-4)

Ella told me that Polly is also the same age as her. There is a sense here that Ella does feel different from some other family members in some ways. She appears to have grouped family members with blond and black brown hair together as if they were of equal status, and felt different from them for having ginger coloured hair. Perhaps, like Holly, Ella is developing awareness of social and cultural perceptions of attractiveness. Thus, ginger coloured hair has been viewed in some spheres as undesirable and not attractive. Ella might have felt different from her family because only she has the less favoured ginger hair. Sharing this less favoured characteristic with her imaginary companion might help her feel less alone in this.

The sense of shared characteristics that Ella had with Polly could also serve to strengthen the friendship bond and foster a perception that as Polly shared the same physical characteristics she possibly shared the same feelings associated with the characteristics (e.g. feeling different from other family members) and she therefore understood Ella's experiences and feelings. As Ella said later on in the interview when seeking contact with Polly for advice:

'she'd know what's wrong with me and I don't have to ask her about it.'
(3.109-10)

As Polly showed all positive characteristics and no negative characteristics, this identification with Polly, feeling that they were similar, could also have served to enhance Ella's self-esteem.

In contrast, Tara did not perceive similarities between herself and her current or previous imaginary companions. This may be because her current and previous imaginary companions were similar versions of real friends and animals known to her. This is discussed further in the cluster theme entitled 'imaginary companion seems real'.

Negative characteristics

Tara and Holly both mentioned a number of their imaginary companions' negative characteristics.

Tara's previous imaginary companions, Annie and Sophie showed a range of negative, unfriendly characteristics. Tara reports that Annie and Sophie, (versions of her then 'two best friends'), used to kick her and scare her – though also notes 'but I liked them'. Events with these imaginary companions appeared to mirror events in her own life. Tara remembers how when younger, the real Sophie would kick, bite and scratch her:

'Karen: Yes. So you think you had those (Annie and Sophie) aged 2-4, and you said that they loved kicking you and scaring you, but you liked them.

Tara: Yes

Karen: So why did they do that do you think?

Tara: I'm not sure...um I think Sophie at the time, I was nanny sharing with her, she was like – we had the same nanny and she would always kick me, bite me, scratch me...

Karen: The real Sophie?

Tara: Yes - she was horrible to me at the time. So I think that's where I got that... Annie I'm not really sure...'

Karen: OK and do you know why Sophie was not very nice to you at the time?

Tara: Oh um the real Sophie she um cos she knew the nanny better. When The nanny bought us both presents she would always give them to

Sophie first. I would always fight over Sophie - we were just like enemies but now we're best friends.'

(9.399-10.413)

It is interesting to note that Tara appears to accept the conflict alongside friendship and that conflict did not seem to intrude on possibilities for friendship as perhaps might be expected. She refers to the younger Sophie as both a best friend and an enemy. Perhaps Tara's imaginary companions provided an outlet for Tara's frustration with the real Sophie. She recalled that she would shout and tell the imaginary Sophie and Annie off, and that her parents would sometimes join in with this as well. Processing these difficult feelings might have enabled the real friendship to flourish in real life as was described by Tara. Tara also appears in the text shown above to be moving towards a more sophisticated understanding of the earlier conflict. She identifies and acknowledges the girls' relationship with the nanny as a source of the conflict. Further, that her perception at the time that Sophie appeared to be given preferential treatment was associated with her part in fighting Sophie.

Holly clearly expressed the view that current imaginary pony Dream's non-compliance, which could be seen as a negative characteristic, actually increased her interest in her imaginary companion:

'Karen: Is there anything you don't like about Dream?

Holly: The fact that she's fussy

Karen: Yes, so she's fussy about that hay...

Holly: (Comes in quickly and emphatically) the thing is – I don't want a perfect horse – it just makes it annoying kind of.

Karen: So you don't want it perfect?

Holly: And when I'm riding I don't want her to do exactly what I say if she doesn't do it (inaudible) so I'm going to have to whip her and stuff – makes it fun (pause) it does get annoying sometimes (gasps).'

(4.147-56)

Tara expressed similar views about her current imaginary horse, Fantazia. Again, the horses' non-compliance adds to the interest and makes the game played with a friend who also has imaginary horses more enjoyable:

'Cos it makes it more interesting if like there is an emergency. And so it's quite funny if like you bring a horse into dressage arena and it won't do dressage. And like I had to borrow my friend's imaginary horse.'
(4.158-61)

Holly recalled her previous imaginary puppies, Jasper and Dora, it is Jasper's incompetence rather than the capable Dora which causes Holly's amusement:

'And they used to come with me everywhere, they used to swim with me. Jasper was quite funny because he was clumsy. He kept falling in. But Dora could go underwater and everything, like usual, and was really clever.'
(5.217-221)

To conclude, there were few examples of imaginary companions' negative characteristics. These characteristics seemed to be accepted and did not have a negative influence on the child's feelings towards their imaginary companions. Some negative characteristics appeared to increase the child's enjoyment of their imaginary companion. There was no evidence that imaginary companions with negative characteristics acted against the best interests of the child.

IC seems real

All three girls acknowledged that their friends were imaginary and seemed quite comfortable with the label of imaginary friend. As discussed earlier, all girls felt that they could call on their imaginary companions when desired, suggesting they had an element of control over the imaginary companion. At the same time, I was struck by how 'real' the imaginary companions appeared to be to the girls; they spoke about them in a way that made them sound real. Several themes emerged which seemed to contribute to this air of reality. Firstly, some imaginary companions showed their independence and sense of will and had their own

likes/dislikes and feelings. Thus, I asked Holly whether current imaginary pony Dream did what she asked, Holly replied:

'Well she doesn't really take orders from me - she's kind of independent. Like I say she's a bit fussy - so she's a bit 'oooh no, I'm not gonna do that.'
(3.123-25)

When I asked Tara a similar question about previous imaginary companions Annie and Sophie, Tara recalled that they were more likely to be in the daytime and not at night, suggesting they had at least partial independence:

'If I shouted at them, I think they did, but at night time they wouldn't.'
(10.442)

Ella's imaginary companion, Polly, seemed to make her own feelings known:

'she doesn't like when I'm all quiet and she doesn't like it cos she feels uncomfortable that I'm not talking to her and she gets very uncomfortable (emphatic) because she's very talkative.'
(2.74-6)

Secondly, imaginary companions were sometimes reported as having lives away from the children:

'sometimes she might be in a show.'
(Holly 4.136)

'when I come home she always talks about her day.'
(Polly 3.117)

Annie and Sophies' independent lives are suggested in that they have their own pets:

'they (Annie and Sophie) had pet cheetahs and pet lions.'

(Tara 10.429-30)

Thirdly, several imaginary companions were similar or identical versions of real people and animals. This was particularly evident in Tara's interview. Fantazia and Tom were exact replicas of horses Tara spent time with on holiday and they shared the same names. Tara continued some of the activities enjoyed with the real horses in her interactions with the imaginary Fantazia and Tom, thus the distinction between the real and imaginary horses was sometimes blurred. It was not always clear in the interview when Tara was talking about the real as opposed to the imaginary horses. Thus, when I asked Tara what Fantazia was like, meaning the imaginary Fantazia, Tara replies:

'I'm still trying to identify what breed she is. I might need to write in Polish – email to the person – ask my friend to write it for me, to ask what breed she is because I'm not really sure.'
(2.75-6)

It would appear here that Tara was thinking of the real horse Fantazia who she spent time with on holiday in Poland. The strong connection between the real and imagined horses is evident later on in the interview:

'Karen: Yes, so the imaginary Fantazia and Tom are they absolutely the same as the real horses?
Tara: Yes
Karen: They're both exactly the same?
Tara: Yes - I haven't changed them.'
(3.96-100)

The real and imaginary horses are perceived to be identical, and this served to enhance the sense of the imaginary horses as being real and not created by Tara.

With regard to Holly, puppies Jasper and Dora were based on a strong eidetic image of dogs:

'Karen: Yes and Jasper and Dora were they based on real dogs or toy

dogs?
Holly: Real, real, I imagine them as real dogs, I can see them in my minds
eye – I know exactly what they look like.'
(7.305-8)

Again, it would seem that the strong association between the real and imagined dogs gives the latter an air of reality.

Ella's imaginary companion was based on a real person. Her imaginary companion Polly emerged after the death of her grandmother, someone whom Ella was very fond of and close to. Ella said that Polly reminded her of her grandma having some identical traits and characteristics and commented that:

'Ella: So she's kind of the spirit of my grandma
Karen: She's the spirit of your Grandma?
Ella: Yes – do you know what I mean? Like when she died I kinda got a
friend that was always there. She's kind of reminded me of my
Grandma.'
(2.46-50)

It would appear that Ella's imaginary companion has been imbued with the qualities of a real known and loved person now deceased, serving to enhance the apparent reality of the imaginary companion.

To conclude, imaginary companions were seen as very friendly, dependable and trustworthy. They listened well and paid attention to the children. These positive qualities were highly valued and seemed to be evidence of the special relationship the girls experienced with their imaginary companions. The small number of negative characteristics did not affect the children's overall enjoyment of the imaginary companion. Whilst the children seemed happy to use the term imaginary friend, and were able to have contact with them when wanted, the imaginary companions did seem very real to the children. It could be argued that imaginary

companions are created by the child and are therefore not real, and would not necessarily be experienced as real. This does not fit with how the children in this study talked about and seemed to experience their imaginary companions. It appeared from the analysis of transcripts that characteristics of the imaginary companions such as their apparent independent will, independent lives and sometimes strong associations with real people and animals, served to foster the illusion of reality.

Superordinate Theme 2: Child's interactions with ICs

The children talked of how and when they interacted with their imaginary companions and why they felt they were important. From these discussions purposes served by the imaginary companions emerged. Two subthemes were identified:

- Nature of interaction
- Purposes served

Nature of interaction

All the girls spoke of their enjoyment of interacting with their imaginary companions. Holly appeared to find it pleasurable and humourous to recall her previous imaginary companions during the interview. She remembered time spent with imaginary twin Lily:

'Holly: And we used to go on adventures. ...And she'd always drive up and she had a pink convertible...and if I was lonely she would play with me.

Karen: So she could drive a car?

Holly: Yes (laughs) she had a licence (giggles).

(6.229-35)

and comments later:

'I should remember them again because they were so fun.'

(6.261)

Both Holly and Tara described using their imaginary ponies and horses in games with others:

'Karen....Do you ever play games or have adventures with her (Dream)?

Holly: Yes, I play this game with my friend, um we had this walk and we got lost in the forest and I used her for that and I used her for a lot of games as well. I had a stable once – she was one of the horses.'

(2.84-9)

Tara reported that she played with and rode her horse when she was on her own and also with a particular friend who is reported to have a horse as an imaginary friend:

'we pretend we're riding horses in my back garden.'

(2.60)

In fact Tara's imaginary horses were used in a rather elaborate fantasy activity or game with other girls who shared a passion for horses. They had compiled a magazine also available on the computer for buying and selling horses:

'Well what happens is umm with imaginary horses we have this flip chart at home which shows what you can do and like it umm shows how much everything costs and you can earn money by winning contests and selling your trophies and then you can buy like new land. And the horses cost money.'

(4165-9)

Tara reports that this is how she had obtained her imaginary horses:

'And we have a magazine, but it's on the computer, of horses for sale, so I bought Fantasia and Tom out of there.'

(4171-2)

Not only was this evidence of rich imaginary play with others, it also appeared that the girls including Tara, showed an emotional attachment to the imaginary horses:

'Tara: ...like um if we want a new horse - if we got tired of our old horse (which I wouldn't do – but some people do) like this other girl, she said when, cos we have sleepovers – that's when we see each other

Karen: Uh huh

Tara: She said that it had died umm, she said that a cat had attacked it – because like instead of selling it, because some people they don't like to sell their horses so she just said it had died.'

(5.200-7)

Whilst Ella's imaginary companion was at times fun and amusing, Ella does not report playing games with her, the primary form of interaction was through conversation:

'She like is there to talk to and it's very fun indoors because if my little siblings are asleep I can talk to her and then go to bed.'

(1.13-14)

Holly and Tara both took on a teaching or nurturing role with some of the imaginary companions. Thus Holly commented about puppy Dora:

'..and I taught Dora how to swim with me.'

(7.296-7)

Tara enjoyed spending time grooming her horses:

'Tara: ...cos I like making them really beautiful
Karen: How do you make them look beautiful?
Tara: Grooming them and washing them.'
(6.244-6)

Ella did not describe this type of teaching or nurturing interaction with Polly. This may be because Polly who was partly based on Ella's grandmother was the one who provided more of the nurturing and guidance.

The frequency of contact the girls reported having with their imaginary companions varied. Ella had at least daily contact with Polly:

'I normally always talk to her, so when I don't talk to her it feels kind of weird...'
(2.79-81)

Holly reports less contact with Dream:

'Not very often, but every so often when I'm a bit bored and a bit lonely.'
(1.42)

I think it is worth noting here that whilst Holly does not report very regular contact with her imaginary companion, she nevertheless views her imaginary horse as 'extremely important' (4.160). Thus it seems that it is the quality of the interaction with the imaginary companion and not necessarily the frequency of contact which may determine the imaginary companion's significance in the child's life. This may also reflect friendships in real life. Whilst for young children friendships are often opportunistic – who is there to play with, preadolescent girls are more selective about who to play with and be a friend to. Secondly, Holly clearly feels the need to limit the time spent with imaginary companions feeling it would be inappropriate to spend large amounts of time with them:

'But if I play with her 24/7 it feels a bit weird, if I'm just playing with an imaginary thing all day...'

(4.165-6)

'But I wouldn't do it 24/7.'

(6.246)

As discussed above, Holly and Ella were able to talk about their interactions with the imaginary companions and there appeared to be consistency in what they said. In contrast, there were some inconsistencies in Tara's interview transcript that suggested that Tara was either unsure or ambivalent about how she felt about her imaginary horses, or was unsure how much to share her feelings about them with me. Thus Tara told me when I asked, that Fantazia and Tom were 'quite important' (7.306) and then went on to say:

'I don't spend much time with them but they are really important.'

(7.308)

Despite initially claiming here that she did not spend much time with Fantazia and Tom, at a later point in the interview when I asked Tara how much contact she currently had with the imaginary Fantazia and Tom she replied:

'It depends how often I'm by myself really – once or twice a day.'

(6.257)

Which I would argue, could be seen as frequent contact with her imaginary friends. Perhaps this ambivalence reflects like Holly, the idea that too much time spent with the imaginary companion would be inappropriate. There maybe a part of Tara that wishes to therefore conceal the imaginary companions or indeed let them go.

The girls in this study interacted with their imaginary companions in a variety of ways. It is perhaps surprising, given the age of Tara and Holly, that playing with the imaginary companions in games with others formed a significant part of the interaction. It might have been assumed that such imaginative play would have been more a feature of young children's interactions.

Purposes served

All three girls described their imaginary companions as important and I would suggest that this is because they served useful purposes for them. The girls spoke of how their imaginary companions prevented them from boredom and/or loneliness. Thus Holly comments:

'I'd say she (Dream) is extremely important, um because if I don't have her I think I might be a bit lonely and times...'
(4.160-1)

Ella similarly said:

'sometimes she makes me laugh and if I get bored at home – cos I've only got little siblings.'
(1.10-11)

The imaginary companions that Tara had when she was younger also appeared to serve the purposes of overcoming boredom and loneliness. Tara notes that when her younger sister arrived, for a while she did not need to have contact with her imaginary companions:

'I think like I spent so much time with my sister and I think she just kind of took over because like I wanted to help look after her...So I stopped playing with my imaginary friends. Cos like when you don't have a sister, you need someone to play with.'
(11.472-3)

Tara recounted how she later developed new imaginary companions, finding that she did not want to play with her sister:

‘and also I don’t play with my sister anymore because she’s the same as Sophie when she was little – she smacks and she bites me. She’s just horrible to me. So I don’t play with her.’
(11.478-80)

Whilst Tara’s imaginary companions as discussed earlier, did appear to show some independence of will, Tara conveys the impression here that she is able to let go of her imaginary companions when not needed, and replace them with others when due to events in life later, she finds that she does need imaginary companions.

All three girls spoke about how their imaginary companions were a support at times of difficulty in their lives. Ella and Holly mentioned that contact with their imaginary companions at these times was sometimes a preferable alternative to talking with their parent.

Ella told me that Polly was very important, serving the purpose of having someone to talk to when things went wrong:

‘It’s because if I had something wrong if she wasn’t there, I’d probably be, my life would be miserable because like if I don’t talk to anyone about it. So she’s quite handy in there because I can talk to her.’
(4.154-7)

‘That if there’s something wrong I can always talk to her about maybe I’m not in very comfortable position talking to my maybe my parents; I can talk to her. And then I’m very comfortable with talking with her. Maybe I can’t talk to my friends, ...If I want to say something to my friends I can say it to her, and then maybe she would understand how I am feeling and that’s what’s good about her.’
(Ella 3.126-32)

Interestingly, Ella held this view despite acknowledging that her mother has let Ella know that she can talk to her about anything:

‘...she says to me that I can tell her anything.’
(5.184-5)

It would appear that talking with her imaginary companion was preferable to talking to others including parents and friends, on several counts. Firstly, Ella felt very at ease in confiding her problems to Polly. Secondly, she felt that she would be understood. Thirdly, talking through her problems in this relaxed state, with Polly enabled Ella to gain a better understanding of the problem and what to do about it. In some ways here, Polly seemed to act like an inner conscience/mentor or superego:

‘Sometimes like if I’ve done something wrong but I don’t know why it’s wrong – if she explains it right then I get kind of shocked what I done wrong – she explains it more.’
(3.113-115)

‘Well she always talks to me and if I’ve done something wrong as I’ve said before, she kind of tells me ‘oh you’ve done this wrong because or this is how you can sort it out, or don’t feel bad about it – so she’s really quite special to me.’
(4.166-169)

Fourthly, Ella finds reassurance from the interaction and is able to rid herself of ‘bad feelings inside of me.’ (4.164).

Ella and Holly both mentioned friendship difficulties at school and found contact with their imaginary companions at these times supportive:

'Like erm if I was getting bullied at school, if I was upset or if I felt that something wasn't right,..... then I could talk to her about it.'
(Ella 2:89-3:92)

'I have a lot of problems sometimes in school because my friend can be really mean to me a lot of the time (sighs) and sometimes I talk to my mum because she's a psychologist and sometimes I talk to her. But you can't always count on mum so that's why I talk to Dream sometimes.'
(Holly 2:70-5)

The preference for talking to the imaginary companion rather than the parent when there are problems may reflect a developmental shift with implications for the parent-child relationship. Whereas younger children might indeed involve their parent(s) when there are difficulties of any sort, older children like Ella and Holly, are becoming more selective about topics they feel comfortable in talking to their parents about. This may in part be due to a developing social and emotional maturity and consequent need for privacy, but might also be accompanied by a growing awareness or perception that parents might not understand their feelings or the situation.

As commented on earlier, Tara talks about the difficulties in her friendships. She also refers to the breakup of a recent friendship with a girl who also had imaginary companions and participated in the horse games:

'the friend that's stopped doing it with me, cos she's – I had a fall out with her and we don't really talk to each other anymore..
(5:190-2)

It is not insignificant to note that the breakdown in the friendship occurred at a time when the girl in question decided that she no longer wanted imaginary companions. It would appear that the shared knowledge of and games with the imaginary companions contributed to the friendship bond. When Tara's friend decided that she no longer wanted imaginary companions, the bond was broken, possibly affecting the levels of trust in the relationship and thus a close friendship came to an end.

In contrast to some of her real life friendships, the most liked characteristic of Tara's current imaginary horse Fantazia is that she was 'really, really friendly' (7.283) and this is mentioned on several occasions. This suggests to me that the imaginary horses served the purpose of substitute friends that could be trusted and were constant:

'I can trust them that they won't go like really bad for me...there maybe obviously something small – but they wouldn't bite me.'
(6.267-8)

'Like if I tell them a secret it's not like they can tell anyone.'
(6.264)

The latter constitutes a significant difference from real life friendships in that even with close friends there is a risk that secrets may be told to others.

It seems to me that Tara's experiences of friendships illustrate the nature of friendships of preadolescent girls. At this age, girls are being more selective and sometimes exclusive about their friendships investing time and emotional energy, confiding in and sustaining particular friendships. There can be considerable upset and emotional distress when a friendship comes to an end.

Another indication that imaginary companions were a source of support at times of difficulty was when I asked Tara how she would feel if she didn't have her imaginary companions. She commented rather as a matter of fact:

'I don't think I'd really mind, because I wouldn't know that they ever really existed. So it wouldn't make much difference to me. I mean obviously when I was like, I mean that if the house was pitch black and I was going out every night or something, then obviously I might get a bit more scared. But um but if I didn't have these imaginary horses then I'd probably have um other ones.'
(7.314-8.319)

When I asked Tara how her imaginary horses helped her when she was scared at night she replied:

‘Cos it’s someone to be with you in the dark.’
(8.327)

There is an element of contradiction here, with Tara appearing to claim that her current imaginary companions are replaceable, suggesting that they were less important and also suggesting the power and control she has over the imaginary companions. Simultaneously, Tara’s vulnerabilities are also exposed; her child like fears of the dark provide the driving force and need to conjure up other imaginary companions as a coping strategy to reduce anxiety.

In terms of other purposes served, Ella articulated how Polly helped her overcome shyness and developed her confidence:

‘I’d probably feel like very shy, cos before when I was like three years old, I wouldn’t talk to anyone and when I got my imaginary friend, I got, I built up my confidence and if she wasn’t there I’d probably be quite shy now.’
(4.160-3)

Lastly, some imaginary companions did seem to serve the purpose of wish fulfillment. Thus, Holly comments on her previous imaginary companion; twin, Lily:

‘Yes well I already had my imaginary twin because I didn’t an imaginary friend – I mean I thought – I already have friends – why do I need an imaginary friend, so I thought imaginary twin - I always wanted a twin... do everything with them...be exactly like you and so it was kind of something I could have.’
(7.278-83)

Tara who had imaginary horses, Fantazia and Tom is emphatic about how much she would like to have her own animal:

'But for instance if you don't have a pet like the girl that decided not to have her imaginary horse, I think, she has something like 24 pets, so she has lots of dogs, lots of cats. So I think that maybe why. But if you like um don't have an animal then it's like you can see why and you want an animal. Like I'm desperate to get an animal.'
(11.485-95)

She suggests in the quote above, that her imaginary horses are a substitute for the real horses or animals that she would love to have. Thus her imaginary horses do provide a level of wish fulfillment.

In summary, the girls had enjoyable interactions with their imaginary companions. For two of the girls, the imaginary horses were used in imaginary games shared with others. Their imaginary companions enabled them to overcome boredom and loneliness when peers and similar aged siblings were not available. The imaginary companions were supportive when there were difficulties in their lives. In this study, all three girls spoke of friendship difficulties and drew support from their imaginary companions at these times. Some imaginary companions appeared to serve the purpose of wish fulfillment, enabling the girls to have an imaginary experience of what they would like to be available to them in the real world.

Superordinate Theme 3: ICs and the real world

Imaginary companions were mostly unknown to others and this seemed to correspond to the child's perceptions of how others might view the child if they had been aware. Two subthemes emerged:

- Anticipated/perceived responses of others
- Conceals ICs

Anticipated/perceived responses of others

Holly and Tara both said that their parents were unaware of their current imaginary companions. They both expressed uncertainty about what their parents would think if they did find out about them:

'Umm I don't know. I think they'd be supportive but I don't know.'

(Holly 3.103-4)

'I'm not sure...I think they would probably just ignore it. Sometimes they might pretend they know and say hello.'

(Tara 8.360-2)

As noted earlier, there were some inconsistencies in Tara's interview, for example, regarding how much contact Tara had with her current imaginary companions. I suggested that Tara might have been unsure of her feelings and how much to reveal to me. Tara's inconsistent feelings about her imaginary horses may have been influenced by her perception of the responses of her parents. Thus, Tara told me that both her parents knew about the imaginary companions she had when she was younger and that they would play a role in telling the imaginary companions off and pretending to smack them when they wouldn't get in the car. Despite parents playing along with the imaginary scenario in this way, when I asked Tara what she thought her parents thought about them she replied:

'I think they thought I was pretty weird.'

(10.454)

'Or like I was really babyish.'

(11.455)

It was interesting that Tara commented twice on how she 'ignored' the imaginary companions she had as a young child:

'I remember they came everywhere with me. But I ignored them the whole time apart from when I was going in the car.'

(9.379-80)

I would tentatively suggest that this ignoring enabled Tara to cope with the conflict of having a need for her imaginary companions to be with her and sensing negative parent perceptions of herself. Ignoring the imaginary companions provided a distance from them, appearing to show that she did not care or need them, thus leaving self-esteem more intact.

Ella expressed rather more confidence that the imaginary companion would be accepted by her mother:

'Well she wouldn't really mind because she says to me that I can tell her anything, cos she's like Polly, so I don't think she'd mind if I told her.'
(5.184-6)

Whilst the girls felt there might be a level of acceptance from parents, there was no indication that parents might feel particularly positive about them. Holly had the perception that others would view imaginary companions as a sign of immaturity. She perceived that a distinction could be made between imaginary games played with friends and having imaginary friends, the latter being seen as more immature:

'well I play imaginary games but you know imaginary friends is kind of like something you'd call for babies and stuff, it's just something like you know in a different way kind of.'
(3.104-9)

She showed an awareness that others could construe the fact that she had imaginary companions negatively and spread rumours:

'Holly: The thing is I'm only going to tell my close friends that, in my class, my very close friends, because some others I can't trust...
Karen: Sure, so you might tell some close friends now?
Holly: But I'm not too sure...some people may say to my face that it's OK, but then behind my back they may say something else.'
(4.180-6)

'and spread rumours and stuff.'

(5.189)

Holly appeared to be aware of the distinction between her perception of children, including herself, who have imaginary companions and how others could misconstrue this with negative intent. Thus, when I asked Holly what advice could be given to a parent of a child with an imaginary friend she says confidently:

'I'd say don't worry – it's just when they get lonely – it's not like they're going to be a wacky person or whatever.'
(5.199-200)

Nevertheless, the awareness of possible negative misconstruction is also evident:

'No, but it's not bad that you know, they can tell other people but not make it sound, I just don't, I hope, cos some other people when they spread rumours it could be OK but they make it sound bad...'
(5.193-6)

Ella was also unsure of what friends might say if they knew that she had an imaginary companion, and like Holly, she was aware that she was vulnerable to being seen in a negative light:

'they might think 'oh she might be a little bit mad' that she has a little, an imaginary friend.'
(5.194-5)

In summary, the children in this study mostly did not expect a positive response from other children and adults should they find out about their imaginary companions, though it was felt that parents might be supportive and understanding. Concerns were expressed about how the children themselves would be seen and that rumours could be spread about them. This may at least partially explain the concealment of imaginary companions in this study. This theme is discussed below.

Conceals ICs

Current imaginary companions were not known to parents and either not known to close friends or siblings or were partially concealed.

Thus Holly and Tara said of their parents:

'They don't actually know about her.'
(Holly 3.99)

'but I think my parents haven't noticed.'
(Tara 8.341)

Ella's imaginary companion, Polly, was completely unknown to others prior to our interview:

Karen: So, nobody else knows about your imaginary friend? No one else at all?
Ella: No.'
(4.173-5)

It would appear that some of the girls chose to interact with their imaginary companions when no one else was around, thus enabling the imaginary companion to remain a more private affair:

Tara comments that she doesn't play or talk to her imaginary horses when her family are present:

'but I don't - like when I'm with my family, I don't.'
(3.117-8)

Ella comments that she goes to her bedroom to have contact with Polly:

'when I get home I sit on my bed and talk to her for about half an hour.'

(2.82-3)

The consistency and stability of Ella's imaginary companion is emphasised throughout the interview. Despite Ella anticipating that her mother would be supportive, Ella was uncertain of friend's responses, and acknowledged that others might perceive her to be strange. This seems to be a factor in Ella's decision to ensure that Polly remains unknown to others:

'so I haven't told anyone just in case.'

(5.195)

Holly's imaginary companions were partially concealed in the games that she played with close friends and siblings. Her close friend or sister would be aware of the named horse or pony being part of their imaginary game, but would mostly not be aware that the horse or pony was an imaginary companion which Holly spent time with outside of the games:

Karen:OK – so you mentioned your friend – did your friend know about Dream?

Holly: No she didn't. She just knew we had horses. In my mind it was Dream.'

(2.86-3.93)

There was a similar situation with her sister:

'My sister knows that we have the game, she doesn't actually know that I play with the horse.'

(3.99-101)

In contrast, Tara's imaginary horses were actually known to a close friend who also had imaginary companions. In this situation both Tara and friend were aware that the imaginary companion was being used in the imaginary horse game played

together, and it appears that the friend was also aware of the importance of the imaginary companion outside of the game:

'my friend, the one that does have imaginary horses knows how much they mean to me. She like plays with them with me the whole time and she knows because she has her own ones.'
(8.349-52)

In this friendship, full knowledge of the of the imaginary companion and its special significance seemed to be evidence of a close and trusting friendship. It is not insignificant to note than another close friendship referred to earlier came to an end when the girl in question decided that she did not wish to have imaginary horses or play the horse games with Tara anymore. This girl no longer has knowledge of the special status of Tara's imaginary companion:

'I think my friend Katy the one who stopped having imaginary horses, she still, she knows that I still have them – but she doesn't know how much I play with them, the one that does have imaginary horses knows how much I play with them and stuff.'
(8.342-5)

The connection between the girls' friendship status and interactions with the imaginary horses is also apparent in the following quote:

'Tara: ..there was a horse called Hosannah, which I really liked...
Karen: What was the name again?
Tara: Hosannah, but I've gone off him now.
Karen: Why have you gone off him?
Tara: Well partly because I broke up with my other friend...and he was also hers and um cos I had Tom as well.'
(5.219-25)

My interpretation here is that at least part of the friendship was sustained upon the shared imaginative play with horses, which both girls knew to be imaginary companions, thus involving trust and secrecy aspects to the friendship. Once this play had been disrupted by one girls' decision not to have or play with imaginary

horses, lack of a shared activity weakened the friendship and Tara may also have felt vulnerable regarding the secrecy aspects, which further threatened the friendship.

In summary, the girls in this study mostly did not seem to anticipate a positive response from parents and others and thus the imaginary companions were unknown or partially concealed from others. They were aware that others might consider them strange or immature or might use knowledge of the imaginary friend to spread rumours about them. Where imaginary companions were known to others this was evidence of a close and trusting friendship.

Discussion of analysis of Study 2 Child interviews

Superordinate Theme 1: Characteristics of ICs

The characteristics of the imaginary companions were closely associated with the forms of interactions the girls had with their imaginary companions and purposes served. Animal and human imaginary companions showed a diverse range of characteristics which were mostly positive or neutral. All girls described the positive characteristics of their imaginary companions and made frequent references to their friendliness and dependability. The imaginary companions listened to the children and showed interest in them. These qualities I would suggest, are evidence of the special relationship that the girls appeared to have with their imaginary companions. It seems to me that the consistency of these positive qualities may have been in contrast to the girls' friendships in real life and thus to some extent served a compensatory purpose. Even in the best of friendships there are bound to be times of misunderstandings, disagreements and a tension between friendship loyalty and going onto to experience new situations with different people. It seems to me that in their interactions with the imaginary companions, the girls could experience the enjoyment and feelings of having a good and dependable friendship with their imaginary companion, with no risk of the more difficult parts of having a real friendship as outlined above. I would agree

with Seiffge-Krenke (1997) who viewed the imaginary companions of adolescents as a form of transitional phenomenon. She concluded that :

The imaginary companion possesses all positive qualities of supportive relationships in that he/she stimulates intimate self-disclosure, maintains secrecy, offers closeness and companionship while at the same time is not an agent of conflict. (p 150)

In this way, it could be seen that this special relationship could act as a rehearsal for real life friendships. Parke and O'Neil (2000) comment:

A major issue that has intrigued theorists over the past century concerns the ways children develop the knowledge and skills necessary to manage relationships with others.

They identify further research which they consider is needed in this area. I would agree that there is a need to know more in order to support young people in this process. It is not insignificant to note that all three girls in the study spoke of friendship issues. Goodwin (2006), Hey, (1997) and Besag (2006) argue that we have ignored both the complexity of how girls organise each other in their friendship relations and the strength of emotions involved and therefore have not been able to support them appropriately when difficulties in social relationships arise. As Besag (2006) comments:

We know comparatively little about the dynamics of girls' friendship bonds; the reasons for the instability of their social relationships, the role individuals play in disputes, and the precipitating factors relating to the conflicts. We appear to have ignored the distress experienced by girls, of all ages, by failing to understand the complex relationships that lie beneath the umbrella label of 'squabbling friends'.
(p.4)

In this study the few characteristics which could be viewed as more negative, such as the imaginary companion's unfriendliness, incompetence or non compliance were not seen as problematic by the children and sometimes these characteristics increased their interest to the child. With regard to the current imaginary companions, there was no evidence that negative characteristics of ICs were

associated with negative outcomes or worked against the best wishes of the children.

It would be helpful if taxonomies of imaginary companions such as that developed by Taylor and Carlson (2002) might be further developed to record both the positive and negative characteristics of the ICs and whether these negative characteristics reflect a positive purpose or negative outcome for the child. This might go some way to alleviate parent concerns that imaginary companions, particularly those with negative characteristics, may be unhealthy or harmful for children.

Clarification of both positive and negative characteristics of ICs in both normative and clinical populations is likely to assist with identifying more worrying features of ICs in clinical populations at an earlier stage. Thus, McLewin and Muller (2006), in their comparison of ICs in normal and Dissociation Identity populations have identified that ICs in clinical populations can sometimes act against the good of the child. This was not the case for the children from a normative sample in this study. This may constitute an important distinction between normal and clinical populations. Recording information on the positive qualities of imaginary companions in clinical populations would also be valuable in examining distinctions. It would be interesting and relevant to discover whether people in clinical populations perceive their ICs to be friendly, amusing and supportive as was the case for the girls in this study.

A striking feature of the interviews was that children spoke about their imaginary companions in a manner that made them seem real. (This was despite the findings that all children acknowledged the imaginary status of their companion, and felt they could call upon the imaginary companions when desired, suggesting an element of agency and control). This seemed to be in contrast to notions sometimes expressed by parents – that children might enjoy the control they can have over their imaginary companion, for example that they can make the

imaginary companion say what they want them to say or do what they want them to do. The opposite appeared to be the case in this study, in that children seemed to value the signs of independence and will in their imaginary companions. Hoff (2005) in her study of 10 year olds with imaginary companions also noticed these types of characteristics for some of the imaginary companions. She used the term 'deep character' for imaginary companions showing at least two manifestations of independent behavior, other imaginary companions not meeting these criteria were termed 'shallow' characters. Taylor et al (2002-2003) also noted characteristics of independent behaviour and an air of reality for some but not all, children's imaginary companions. They viewed the experiences of adult fiction writers reporting the seeming autonomy of their fictional characters as being an analogous adult fantasy activity:

In these accounts, writers describe their characters as autonomous beings who exist outside of their authors' control and have minds of their own.
(p 363)

Taylor et al use the concept of 'illusion of independent agency' to describe both sets of experiences and suggest that these illusions may be signs of expertise in imagining in both child and adult populations. They comment that this expertise in fantasy and imagination may be the culmination of a process whereby conscious imagining has become unconscious and autonomous and that this might provide an explanation for the illusion of independent agency. In my study all three girls had had the experience of having imaginary companions since early childhood. Two girls were able to recall the imaginary companions they had when much younger. I think Taylor et al's theorizing on the automatising of imaginary activity and the illusion of independent agency provides a credible explanation for the apparent reality of imaginary companions to the girls in this study.

Superordinate Theme 2: Child's interactions with ICs

The girls interacted with their imaginary companions in a variety of ways both in private and sometimes in the company of others. It was evident from the interviews

that using their imagination in these ways was very enjoyable to them. Some interactions appeared to be purely imaginary and carried out when there was an opportunity for the child to be on their own. As Singer and Singer (1990) comment, imaginative play in middle childhood does become more internalised and private:

In middle childhood overt play is gradually and subtly transformed into private thought. It does not disappear, but a deeper level of inner experience becomes central to the nature of the child.
(Singer & Singer, 1990, p 231)

On other occasions, both Holly and Tara played horse games, with their imaginary companions, with friends and siblings that took place outside and included physical movements and role play elements. I was rather surprised that playing with the imaginary companions was still a prominent activity at eleven years of age. Tara in particular participated in a very rich and sustained fantasy with a group of other girls which involved her imaginary horses. Singer and Singer (1990) comment that fantasy play in middle childhood has been ignored by researchers who have made the assumption that it declines after the early years of childhood. In contrast to this perspective, Singer and Singer assert

We will propose here that, for better or worse, our impulse for make-believe and pretending, for role-enactment and fantasy, scarcely fades away at all.

They further comment that children in middle childhood have more time to play with others unsupervised by adults and that new opportunities for fantasy are available, such as computer and board games, and drama. As Singer and Singer (1990) point out, middle childhood is a stage of development where children are learning the rules of games and the social skills to become part of a group and that:

Sharing make-believe play and various forms of story-telling becomes a kind of cement that enhances the formation of early peer groups in middle childhood.
(p 239)

In this study, it was evident that playing horse games together was an important feature of some of the girl's friendships in the two year 6 classes. I would suggest that the games constituted forms of make believe play and story-telling, which served as a bond between the girls. I would also suggest that not only are children such as the girls in this study, learning about the rules of games and social skills, children are drawing on their emotions in their sustained play with others. The level of emotional engagement that may be present is I think illustrated by this quote from Tara:

'.....my friend, the one that does have imaginary horses knows how much they mean to me. She like plays with them with me the whole time and she knows because she has her own ones.'

(8.349-52)

Also, the girls in their interviews spoke of close friendships and trusting others which I would suggest involves a level of emotional engagement. A rather poignant testimony to the strong association between the fantasy play and friendships, is Tara's recollection of how a close friendship came to an end when the particular girl in question decided not to play horse games or to have imaginary horse friends anymore.

I was interested to revisit Hoff's study (2004-2005) after my analysis of Study 2 as it was a recently published study of a non-clinical population of ten year olds which aimed to explore purposes served. As referred to in the literature review, Chapter 2, Hoff's research included interviewing twenty six children aged ten years, with current or previous imaginary companions. Hoff has developed a very helpful framework for categorising the purposes served by children's imaginary companions. Hoff viewed the overall purpose of imaginary companions as identity formation. She has clustered fifteen purposes served by imaginary companions into five areas; company/comfort, regulation/motivation, self-enhancement, extended person and life quality.

The main purposes identified in Study 2 were 'overcome boredom/loneliness,' 'support re difficult situations' and 'wish fulfillment'. The first theme in Study 2 fits within Hoff's area of 'company/comfort' which Hoff defines as:

to give comfort or help to endure boredom, loneliness, or fear of darkness.

(p161)

'Support re difficult situations' appeared to relate to Hoff's area of 'Regulation/motivation'. Here, Hoff described ICs as meeting 'more complex functions' (p162) sometimes involving supporting the child with regard to situations in their daily lives. In my view, I think it would be helpful to adapt Hoff's framework and extend the range of themes within 'regulation/motivation' to include 'supports/listens at times of difficulty'.

The third purpose identified in Study 2 - wish fulfillment - might fit within Hoff's fifth category of 'Life Quality Enhancement'. Whilst in Hoff's framework, the main examples given were children in her study who had created paracosms, which did not apply to the children in Study 2, she also describes the category as:

to enhance life quality, just as imaginary and pretend play often do. They were created for the fun of experiencing something that is not possible in reality.' (p 173)

The category of 'Life Quality Enhancement' could be extended to include experiences such as the wish fulfillment of the girls in Study 2, where they could imagine being someone or having things that were not currently available to them in the real world.

Lastly, the theme of 'IC has similar characteristics' which emerged in study 2 could be seen to relate to Hoff's category of 'Self-Esteem Enhancement'

The main difference between the two studies was that Hoff considers the overall purpose to be identity formation (developing the concept of self). This did not appear to be the case for the girls interviewed for Study 2. Also, Study 2, which was of a much smaller sample did not find evidence of purposes that Hoff has categorized as 'extended personality'. In Hoff's study, this category referred to children in the study, both boys and girls, who had used their imaginary companions for example to experience 'non-stereotypical sex roles' a description is given of a boy enjoying cooking with his girl imaginary companion. This was not apparent in my study of girls. It did appear however, that the girls were processing and or responding to perceived social and cultural expectations. In this study, this seemed to be in relation to physical attributes – hair and eye colour, time spent with the imaginary companion and levels of concealment of the imaginary companion. The latter is discussed further in the next section.

Superordinate theme 3: ICs and the real world

In the main the imaginary companions of children in this study were mostly unknown to others. In part this might be due to the fact that fantasy play does undergo a developmental transition from make-believe play in young children to more internalised forms of fantasy such as day dreaming reflecting the growth of cognitive processes such as concrete optional thinking in middle childhood (Singer and Singer, 1990). However, the concealment or privacy of imaginary companions is likely also to reflect children's perceptions of the social context – of the perceived attitudes of parents, friends, peers and others. In this study, children were unsure about possible parent response and responses of friends if they were to find out about the imaginary companions. Whilst the children felt that their imaginary companions might be accepted by parents, there was no indication that parents or friends might particularly value the presence of the imaginary companions. On the contrary, the children expressed concerns that they might be seen as strange or weird by others.

Age is a relevant factor here, and one child in Study 2 expressed that she felt having an imaginary friend up until the age of seven was normal, but having an

imaginary companion after age seven would be considered unusual unless there were extenuating circumstances e.g. having no siblings to play with. There have been few studies of older children with imaginary companions. Thus, it is significant to note that in two such studies, both researchers comment on their observations that some children were reluctant to talk about their imaginary companions: Pearson et al (2001) note the falling incidence rate of imaginary companions when comparing younger with older children, and that this 'might be an underestimate in prevalence' due to the child's reluctance to disclose information about their imaginary companion:

However, it was apparent to interviewers that from 10 years upwards, some children were reluctant to respond positively to the questions asked. Some older children approached the interviewers after the interviews to inform them that they did have an imaginary companion, although they reported that they did not.
(Pearson et al, 2001, 20)

Similarly, Hoff (2004-2005) comments under the heading of 'A delicate subject matter' that some children felt uncomfortable when being interviewed about their imaginary companions:

Still having imaginary companions at the age of 10 or the mere thought of past companions appeared to evoke feelings of awkwardness in some children. They giggled intermittently when giving accounts of their make-believe friends, indicating that they believed it was embarrassing to indulge such fantasies. Others described different occasions with their pretend playmates as awkward, for example when other people appeared unexpectedly.
(Hoff, 2004-2005, 161)

Hoff comments that whilst some children did not mind talking about imaginary friends in the interviews, and in the company of others, for some having an imaginary companion was 'profoundly private' for various reasons.

It is likely that there are several reasons why children in our society may wish to conceal their imaginary companions or certain parts of them. Firstly, older children

such as those in this study, will have an awareness of what types of play including play with imaginary companions, is considered appropriate in the culture they live in. In our society, imaginary companions have been associated with young children and consequently their presence in older children is assumed to be a sign of immaturity or difficulty.

Secondly, childrens' concerns about revealing their imaginary companions are likely to reflect the demands of their current social context. As Goodwin (2006) and Besag (2006) note there is intense pressure for preadolescent girls to become an accepted and included member of the peer group. Further, that inclusion and friendship is often based on perceived similarities, and exclusion on the construction of difference. The girls in this study had an awareness that in having an imaginary companion they could be construed negatively as a different, thus making them vulnerable to rumour and exclusion.

They may also have been aware of the stereotyped perception that children with imaginary companions are lonely and do not have friends. It is not insignificant that two children let me know that they did have friends, implying that their imaginary friends were not a substitute for real friends. Finally, research studies have shown that children use their imaginary companions for emotional support and to cope with difficult situations and to process feelings about themselves (Nagera, 1969, Seiffge-Krenke, 1997, Taylor, 1999). The sensitive nature of these issues would indicate the need for privacy. Indeed, as the children in this study indicate, one of the most important and most liked aspects of their imaginary companions is the quality of being trustworthy, some one to listen and confide things to, and to keep their secrets.

Hoff (2004-2005) records in her research that fourteen out of twenty six children said that their imaginary friends were a secret. This again indicates that a significant proportion of imaginary companions of older children will be unknown to

others, and may have led to assumptions being made by researchers that they are a rare occurrence in older children.

I think it is very interesting to note that the children in this study continued their interactions with their imaginary companions despite their awareness of the social and cultural context referred to above including anticipated parent and peer responses. The children were able to separate the more negative social and cultural perceptions from their own perceptions which were that there was nothing harmful to the child herself in having an imaginary companion. Thus Ella would advise parents:

‘I’d say just like believe in your child and that there’s nothing wrong with having an imaginary friend – it’s just like an extra friend a normal friend that you have in school or maybe outside school.’

(5.211-14)

I would suggest that these children did continue with their imaginary companions because the imaginary companions did serve important purposes for them – they were enjoyable and entertaining and supported them when there were difficulties in their lives. Perhaps the girls’ heightened skills in imagination and sustained fantasy was a resilience factor in this display of autonomy. It is a shame that the girls felt the need to conceal such an imaginative aspect of their personality and I would hope in time that more extensive research in imagination will enable us to give due respect to its influence in development.

Chapter 6

Summary and evaluation

Introduction

This chapter begins with summaries of Studies 1 and 2. It outlines how findings from this research will be disseminated and considers how the research may be applied in professional practice. Implications for further research in this area will be discussed. The chapter concludes with an evaluation of the research, considering rigor, coherence and reflexivity.

Summary of Study 1

In this study of boys and girls aged between five to ten years, four children had more than one imaginary companion. Some children had a number of imaginary companions with different characteristics and these appeared to serve different purposes for each child. Imaginary companions showed a degree of independence, for example, having lives away from the child. Three children had imaginary companions who showed negative characteristics, yet they still appeared to serve a positive purpose for the child, for example, enabling them to express difficult feelings regarding events in their lives, in a way that was beneficial to them. All children reported that their imaginary companions were important and that they enjoyed playing and interacting with their imaginary companions. All children in this study reported that they had traits in common with their imaginary companions which may serve the purpose of developing their self-identity and self esteem. The children identified other purposes served which included having a companion and playmate who was always available, overcoming feelings of boredom and loneliness, entertainment, releasing anger and feelings of upset, and support for difficult situations.

In this study, parents had at least partial awareness that their child had imaginary companions. This was particularly so for the younger children in the study. A

pattern emerged suggesting that imaginary companions meeting emotional needs might be more private than those meeting the purposes of play and entertainment. Further research could be usefully carried out to see if this might be the case for other children with imaginary companions. The imaginary companions of the older children in the study tended to be more private.

Summary of Study 2

This was a study of older girls, aged eleven years, from a similar ethnic background (White British). All three girls had current imaginary companions and two remembered the imaginary companions they had had when much younger.

Imaginary companions took both human and animal form. They were frequently described in positive terms such as being friendly and dependable. Negative characteristics such as an imaginary companion's non-compliance were not seen as a problem to the children. Indeed negative characteristics served to increase the child's interest in the companion.

The children were able to call on their imaginary companions when desired, thus suggesting elements of agency and control. Nevertheless, the imaginary companions in this study appeared real to the children. They sometimes had their own lives when away from the child and showed their own will and independence. They also appeared to have their own feelings, likes and dislikes. Some imaginary companions were similar to real people and animals known to the children. I have drawn on the work of Taylor et al (2002-3) by suggesting that rather than confusing fantasy and reality, the ability of the girls to sustain this illusion may be evidence of enhanced skills in using their imagination.

The girls identified a range of purposes served by their imaginary companions. These included having someone to listen to them and to talk to in confidence. They were seen as a good alternative to speaking to parents. The imaginary companion was also used as a playmate, particularly when there was not a similar aged

sibling to play with. The imaginary companions helped them overcome boredom and loneliness. Imaginary companions provided support when there were friendship difficulties and bullying, and when things went wrong. One girl talked about how her imaginary companion had helped her overcome shyness and to develop her confidence.

The imaginary companions in this study, in contrast to Study 1, were mostly unknown to parents and friends. Whilst the girls felt that their parents might be supportive if they did find out about their imaginary friends, a degree of uncertainty was expressed by two of the girls. Two girls had imaginary companions whose identity was concealed in games with others. Where the imaginary companion was known to a friend, this knowledge served as a bond and was evidence of a close, trusting friendship. It has been discussed that imaginary companions may well become more private reflecting a growth in cognitive skills as children grow older, thus physical, acting out make-believe play in young children develops into more internalised fantasy such as day dreaming (Singer and Singer, 1990). I suggest that other factors also contribute to the increasing privacy and concealment of the imaginary companion as the child grows older. The girls in this study did not expect a positive response from others with regard to their imaginary companions. They were aware that they might be viewed as strange or lacking in friends. Thus they appeared to show some awareness of the cultural stereotypes of children with imaginary companions. Consequently, imaginary companions were for the most part private or partially concealed in games. It was also the case that all the girls used their imaginary companions not only for entertainment and enjoyment, but also to deal with difficult feelings in relation to events in their lives. When imaginary companions were used for the latter, interactions with the imaginary companion took place in private.

Dissemination of findings

I have presented my research as it has developed to research support groups at the Institute of Education, University of London and at Barking and Dagenham

Community Educational Psychology Service. I have made a presentation and poster presentation to the Doctoral School Conferences at the Institute of Education. I am contributing to a chapter entitled 'imaginary friends, hallucinations and psychosis' in the writing of a second edition of 'Child Mental Health in Primary Care' by Spender, Dawkins, Hill and Kendrick which was first published in 2001. I intend to submit articles based on my completed research to peer reviewed psychology and education journals.

Applications of the research

In commenting on the quality of qualitative research, Yardley (2000) asserts that its usefulness and relevance is one of four important features to be evaluated. The aim of this section is to identify how these research findings can be applied.

Whilst acknowledging the small sample sizes, a range of purposes served by children's imaginary companions were identified through this in-depth analysis. I have already commented that children with imaginary companions do not form a homogeneous group. Imaginary companions may serve different purposes for different children. Nevertheless, I anticipate that this analysis will be of use both to child practitioners and to imaginary companion researchers in coming to an understanding of the purposes served by a child's imaginary friends. This research was based on the analysis of interviews from a non-clinical population. It may be of relevance to clinicians or researchers of clinical populations in terms of comparison. It is recognised that the findings from a study of this size cannot be generalised in an empirical sense. The contribution of this research is to develop theory which can be used at a conceptual level, in different situations. The generalisation is best conceptualised as at a theoretical level. As Smith and Eatough (2006) comment:

Researchers can also think of theoretical rather than empirical generalisability. Theoretical propositions can be refined and modified through comparison with other cases, other conceptual claims in the extant literature, and the personal and professional experience of the researcher

or reader. The strength of the IPA study is then evaluated in terms of the insights it gives concerning the topic under investigation. (p 329)

There have been few qualitative studies on the purposes of imaginary companions (Gleason et al 2000). In the current study, the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis has provided rich data on children's interactions with their imaginary companions and the purposes served, thus making a distinct contribution to the research. I have demonstrated that IPA can be used successfully with children.

This research has highlighted for me the importance of imaginative play, (including play with imaginary companions) in terms of providing a space where children can learn, entertain themselves, develop their identity, explore emotions and find comfort. As an Educational Psychologist I am increasingly more curious about children's play and how this is facilitated both in terms of development and well-being and in terms of a therapeutic intervention.

A greater understanding of the developmental and psychological significance of imaginary activities including imaginary companions and impersonation could contribute to the earlier identification of children whose development is of concern and where intervention might be required. These could include children who fail to readily engage in imaginary activities.

My research could inform curriculum provision and adult interactions with children. Parents, teachers and child-care staff could be made more aware of the importance of make-believe play and story telling and of interventions to facilitate this.

I anticipate that this research could be applied by those who are therapeutically employed with children and their families such as psychotherapists. For example, it would be useful assessment practice to identify any imaginary companions, alongside other imaginary and transitional phenomena, and to investigate 'self-

soothing' (Esplen & Garfinkel, 1998) or other purposes served in order to inform intervention.

A need has been identified to compare the characteristics and features of imaginary companions in normative and particular clinical samples (McLewin and Muller 2006) with an eventual aim of possibly identifying psychopathology at an earlier stage. More qualitative research of clinical and normative samples is required. My research might usefully inform proposals for future research.

My research findings when supplemented by findings from the literature reviewed, provide evidence of the positive purposes served by the imaginary companions of school-aged children. It is important that this research is accessible to parents, teachers and child care workers to provide unambiguous information and allay concerns identified in Chapter 1. Information could be shared through child-development workshops and training, leaflets, web-site information and radio interviews, and features for parent magazines. My research challenges some of the less positive views of imaginary companions in older children e.g. that these children are lonely, lack friends or are strange. As a consequence of this publicity, I would hope that over time, school aged children with imaginary companions will receive a respectful and sympathetic response from others based on knowledge and understanding.

In this study, imaginary companions were sometimes reported by the children to show unfriendly or non compliant behaviours. In some cases, such characteristics maintained the child's interest in the imaginary companion. In other cases, these apparently negative characteristics served a positive purpose for the child in terms of diffusing difficult feelings or developing mechanisms for self-regulation. Parents, clinicians and researchers will need to consider this facet rather than assume that negative interactions with imaginary companions are undesirable or pathological.

To conclude this section, I would assert that both studies 1 and 2 contribute to the research on imaginary companions by providing a systematic analysis of the purposes served by a child's different imaginary companions. A range of purposes were identified during the analysis of both studies. The traditional research focus of developmental psychologists on a single primary imaginary companion is likely to reveal only some of the purposes served for the child when they have more than one.

Directions for future research

It would be useful for future research to compare and contrast the characteristics of imaginary companions and personified objects in pre-school and school-aged children. Such phenomena appear to serve similar, but also distinct purposes. There may also be a developmental aspect in that personified objects may be a characteristic of younger and not older children's imaginary companions.

There is a need to explore the range of imaginary creations a child utilises, including imaginary companions, personified objects, impersonation or imaginary identities and paracosms, and to endeavour to define these different categories. Such clarification would facilitate identifying any distinct and common purposes.

One finding which could usefully be researched further was that imaginary companions that met emotional needs and needs relating to self-esteem were more private and sometimes a secret shared with selected others. In contrast, imaginary companions who were primarily playmates, providing entertainment or being a vehicle for imaginative ideas, were more likely to be known to others.

As mentioned above, some children reported imaginary companions who showed unfriendly behaviour that served a positive purpose for the child. Further research would help to establish whether this is a common theme and purpose in children's interactions with their imaginary companions. In particular, this may be a distinguishing feature from the imaginary companions of the clinical Dissociation

Identity Disorder population whose childhood imaginary companions were reported sometimes to act against the child's best interests (McLewin and Muller 2006).

Finally, in undertaking this research I have become aware that children in a diverse range of groups report having imaginary companions. It would be useful for future studies to explore this. Thus, a study could focus on teenagers with Down Syndrome or Asperger Syndrome who have imaginary companions. There may be commonalities in purposes served and differences/distinct purposes. It is suggested that such knowledge may assist us in recognising self-support strategies and in providing ideas of how to intervene with others in similar situations to use self-support strategies. It may also help to explore parent views in order to gain parental perceptions of when imaginary companions are a benefit and highlight instances when they may be a hindrance to the child.

Evaluation

I have already discussed one of Yardley's (2000) four principles in evaluating qualitative research which was concerned with the importance and relevance of the research applications. In this section I shall consider the three remaining principles: the rigour, commitment and competence of the research, coherence and transparency and sensitivity to context.

Rigour, commitment and competence

In terms of competence and commitment to the research, I was previously familiar with epistemologies influencing qualitative research. Whilst new to IPA, I have taken steps to develop my skills and understanding of the approach: I have participated in IPA workshops which involved debate on research issues, and analysis and feedback on work in progress. I have also participated in an IPA discussion forum on the internet. I have exposed my research to discussion and critical evaluation from a research supervisor with much experience in using this approach. I feel these steps have enabled me to enhance my skills in analysis and interpretation.

Coherence and transparency

Yardley (2000) includes within this principle the transparency of methods used, and presentation of data, clarity and power of the description, the coherence of theory and method and reflexivity. I have provided a justification for the methodology, that interpretative phenomenological analysis would enable me to explore perceptions of this phenomenon in depth. I feel a strength of this study is that I have used this approach effectively with children, as IPA studies with children are still rare, though appear to be increasing.

As Smith (2004) notes, different interpretations of the data are possible. This may partly be so because IPA is an approach which actively invites different levels of interpretation. It is also an approach which has a strong hermeneutic underpinning which acknowledges for example, that the researcher or reader might bring different knowledge and perspectives to the interpretations. Smith (2004) comments that what is important in terms of validity is that the interpretation is a consequence of engaging with what has emerged from the data, rather than imposing a theoretical framework on to the data. IPA requires there to be a transparency about the process of the research, and measures taken to ensure that the analysis and conclusions are plausible.

I have aimed to be transparent about the methods adopted, the samples and about my stand point as a researcher, (see below). I have endeavoured to work systematically and closely with the data and have provided quotations from the interviews transcripts with enough frequency and detail for the reader to have a coherent sense of the research in order to make a decision as to its plausibility (Smith, 2006). I have included a sample of annotated interview transcripts and themes identified in the Appendices. Smith (2003) suggests a paper trail which is examined by an independent auditor to assess rigour, reliability and validity of claims made. I have at various points asked colleagues who are Educational

Psychologists to read through the interview transcripts and analysis and to comment on thoroughness and validity.

Reflexivity

Both Yardley (2000) and Elliott et al (1999) highlight the importance of identifying for the reader, the theoretical orientation, beliefs and assumptions of the researcher that have influenced the research. Elliott et al refer to this as 'owning one's perspective' and that this enables the reader to make their own interpretation of the data and to reflect on alternative interpretations. I have described the psychological theories which underpin my practice both as an educational psychologist and as a researcher in Chapter 3. I regard myself as a critical realist, and very much subscribe to interactionist perspectives which seek to understand people in their particular contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This is very much in keeping with Heidegger's theories underpinning phenomenology, (cited by Larkin Watts & Clifton, 2006) and IPA. As Larkin et al (2006) note:

IPA is concerned with understanding the person-in-context, and exploring persons' relatedness to, or involvement in, the world. (p 110).

There is a coherent theoretical rationale to the research and its IPA methodology. Rather than impose pre-conceived categories of purpose to the data, I have interviewed the children on their perceptions of the imaginary companions, the nature of the interactions with the imaginary companions, and events going on in the children's lives. This enabled me to draw out the purposes served by the child's imaginary companion in their particular context. I believe that my training as an Educational Psychologist and experience as a psychologist working with children and parents within an interactionist framework has provided useful skills and knowledge which I utilised in the process of carrying out this research. Use of IPA as a research approach has been exciting, stimulating, and challenging. Having the thinking and debating space and support of an IPA research group has been invaluable in developing my skills and confidence in its use.

IPA provided a research framework that facilitated my commitment to listening to the views of children, and their perceptions, providing an important contribution to our understanding of the psychological context. I was surprised and pleased to find that the older children in particular, were able to clearly articulate their feelings about their imaginary companions and purposes they served for them. I therefore suggest that it would be appropriate to ask older children more directly about the purposes their imaginary companions serve in future research.

Sensitivity to context

Yardley (2000) defines this as acknowledgement of the researcher/participant relationship and to the social and cultural context of the research as well as appropriateness of methods and literature reviewed.

I was aware that being a psychologist and researcher might have had an impact on the research. I endeavoured to clarify my role as researcher, rather than emphasising my role as psychologist to the children interviewed. In fact, the topic of imaginary companions has received little attention from Educational Psychologists. It was important to manage the power imbalance by letting the children know that whilst I thought that imaginary friends were important and special to children, I knew very little about their imaginary friends and was very interested and curious to find out.

I have commented that the social context investigated in the research and in the literature review is bound by western cultural beliefs and values and therefore may not be applicable to other society's cultures and values. I have acknowledged that other cultures do hold different values for example about the value of play. The literature review has given emphasis to the historical, social and cultural context of the research on imaginary companions, and the consequences of this in terms of our lack of understanding of the phenomenon and the stigmatising in particular of older children who have imaginary companions. It was therefore important that as

a researcher, I was communicating my understanding of the positive associations of having an imaginary companion to research participants. In so doing, I realise with hindsight, that this may have inhibited children from letting me know about any negative aspects of their interactions with their imaginary friends.

The imaginary companions of the older children in Study 2 were mostly unknown to, or concealed from others. Ella had spoken to no one about her imaginary friend before the interview. I felt privileged to hear her story, and was also aware of professional issues in respect of confidentiality. The process of the research in Study 2 involved the children's Class Teacher talking to the class about my visit and the research. It also involved me talking to the class, class pupils completing the questionnaire and interviews on school site of a selection of pupils. This process inevitably stimulated discussion amongst pupils, some revealing to others for the first time that they did have imaginary friends, this might have left some children uncomfortably exposed. By the same token, there were some positive outcomes from this exposure, thus Holly comments:

'Holly: I only just found out that my friend had one as well-just now cos
apparently she talked to you as well. I found out that she had one.

Karen: Oh right

Holly: So I feel a lot more confident about it now.'

(3.112-116)

In hindsight, I would have told the children that these discussions might take place between the children, so that children with imaginary companions would have more information about what participating in the research might involve, before giving consent.

Final reflection and conclusion

The research process has been lengthy, stimulating and rewarding. My starting point was having limited knowledge of the phenomenon of imaginary companions.

Use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis has been a professionally liberating experience as it has provided a structure to enable an in-depth engagement with two small samples of children to gain a rich picture of how imaginary friends featured in the lives of these children and how the children felt about them. The purposes identified were varied, but this research emphasises the valid and positive contributions imaginary companions bring to the lives of individual children, and clearly merit acceptance in their own right.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Child semi-structured interview schedule Study 1

Imaginary Friends

Interview Schedule: Child

Name: _____ **D.O.B:** _____

Name of parent: _____ **Date:** _____

Introduction:

My name is Karen. I'm learning about what children play, what they pretend/imagine, and about their friends. I am talking with lots of children. Sometimes I'm talking to their parents and sometimes their teachers.

Is it OK if I talk with you about that? If you don't want to answer a question you don't have to.

I'm going to turn the tape on to record this – so that I don't have to remember what we talked about. Is that OK?

Record on tape: This is Karen talking to: _____

Warm up:

- a. What do you most like to play or do at school?
- b. What do you most like to play/do at home?
- c. What is your favourite toy?
- d. What is your favourite game?
- e. Who do you like to play with?
- f. Can you draw a picture of your friend?

Now I'm going to ask you some more questions about friends. Some friends are real like children who live on your street, the ones you play with. Some friends are pretend friends (imaginary friends). Pretend friends (imaginary friends) are ones that are make-believe, that you pretend are real. Some pretend friends are like dolls or toys or animals or people that you pretend are real. Do you have an imaginary friend?

If child has an imaginary friend:

Factual/Exploratory:

1. Do you have one imaginary friend or more than one?
2. What is your friend's name?
3. Where did that name come from?
4. Is (was) your friend a toy like a teddy bear or doll or is it completely pretend?
5. Can you tell me about him/her/it/them?
(prompts age, gender, physical appearance, size, colour, where lives and sleeps, likes, dislikes, personality, habits, relationships).I
6. How did you meet your friend?
7. What do you do or talk about with your imaginary friend?
8. Does ____ usually do what you ask? (Do they sometimes surprise you when they say something, do something? Tell me about that)
9. Can you draw a picture of your imaginary friend?

Feelings towards:

10. What do you like most about your imaginary friend? (Prompt: do they help you? fun to be with?)
11. Are there things you dislike about your imaginary friend?
12. How important/special is your imaginary to you? Not important, important, very important. If child is able to understand, circle given response.
13. How would you feel if you didn't have imaginary friends? (prompt: how would things be different?).

Views of others:

14. Who else knows about your imaginary friend? (Prompt: parent, brother, sister, friend, teacher. What do they say, what do they do?)
15. What would you say to parents whose child has an imaginary friend and they are not sure what to say or do? (Prompt: join in games, talk to it, ignore it?)

Exit:

16. If imaginary friend has gone: What happened to your pretend friend?
(Prompt: when, where to, why)

Ask about other previous imaginary friends and other imaginary creations - go through questions above as appropriate.

Thank child and present sticker/gift

Appendix 2: Information and consent form

Imaginary Friends Research

Information and Consent Form

My name is Karen Majors, I am an Educational Psychologist and part time tutor at the Institute of Education, University of London. This research is undertaken as part of my doctorate studies.

This research is about children's imaginary friends. Little research in this area has been done. Most of the studies that have been carried out show them to be a positive feature in the lives of the children who have them. Studies also show that they are rather more common than we might suppose. The aim of this study is to find out more about the imaginary friend, and about the functions they might serve for the child.

You do not have to give your or your child's name, and information you and your child provide will remain confidential. Where information or quotes are included in publications/media interviews, these will not be identifiable. You and your child's participation is voluntary, and you and your child can withdraw from the study at anytime and for any reason.

It is not anticipated that this interview will cause any discomfort and you are free to choose not to answer any particular question(s). I am aware however, that some information maybe sensitive. In the unlikely event that distress is caused, I would be able to provide contact details of a person who would be able to help.

I am very willing to answer any questions you have about the research. I can be contacted on:

Monday, Tuesday and Friday: 020 8 802 8120

Wednesday and Thursday: 020 7 612 6283

If you feel all you have all the information you need to consent to participating in the research and for your child to be interviewed, please sign below. (If you wish to remain anonymous, you can just give your initials)

This is to confirm that I have read the above and am willing for me and my child to participate in the research.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

This form has been draw up in accordance with The British Psychological Society 'Ethical Guidelines: Guidelines for minimum standards of ethical approval in psychological research' July 2004.

Appendix 3.1: Pen portrait Antonio

Antonio age five

Antonio's mother Rocio is from Columbia and his father Simon is British. Antonio is an only child. Parents let me know that Antonio has had a range of illnesses and allergies, partly associated with difficulties in eating food. He has frequently been taken to hospital in an ambulance.

Antonio has three imaginary friends, who are brothers. The first one is reported to have emerged when Antonio was two years, ten months.

Britten A boy age twelve years

'He likes wearing smart clothes and last week he likes riding on his motorbike'

'Britten is always good'

'Britten eats good food'

'He doesn't like being called nasty names'

Ridey A boy age eight years

'He lives in Columbia where mummy and me come from'

'Ridey's really naughty, Ridey always smacks me'

Ridey has his own imaginary friend, Harvey, who Antonio says he has not met.

Buzzie A boy age six years

'Buzzie's ill today so he's not here'

'I know why because he doesn't eat vegetables'

'He's always ill but the problem is he can't – he can feel the vomit coming out when his vomit comes out he will see, you can actually see all the bad food he's eaten'

IMAGE REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES



Appendix 3.2: Pen portrait Harry

Harry age 6

Harry is an articulate boy, though his mother Sarah reports that this is not reflected in his reading tests. Parent and school staff report that Harry is unsettled by change e.g. in the timetable at school. Harry has a brother who is several years older.

Harry has three imaginary friends; the first one is reported to have emerged at two and a half years.

Barnaby Bear Male adult

'He's brown like normal bears'

'He usually does a lot of writing in his diary...words that are important in space books'

Manager Male age twenty years

'He has a life of his own'

'Me and manager are the only bosses in my club'

'He's one of my best friends-one of them'

Ducky Male age fifteen years

'Me and Ducky have something in common because Ducky's got flat feet and I've got flat feet'

'He's good at fixing things and he's good at stopping people...like stopping baddies from stealing cars and things like in spiderman1'

IMAGE REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES



Appendix 3.3 Pen portrait Lisa

Lisa age 6

There is a big age gap between Lisa and her brother who is in his late teens. Lisa is described by her mother Carol as being cheeky, talkative and confident.

Lisa currently has four imaginary companions.

Minty Imaginary pony age five years

Minty is partly based on a toy so meets the criteria of personified object and imaginary companion.

'I got a toy about her and one completely pretend'

'She likes bubble gum. Yes because it makes her mouth exercise'

Invisible Amy, Megan and Katie Girls aged four and five years

These imaginary companions are smaller and younger versions of Lisa's school friends and share the same names.

'They are real invisible friends'

'My invisible friends are shorter than me, so I've got to teach them'

'She likes playing with me and talking to me'

IMAGE REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES



Appendix 3.4: Pen portrait John

John age 8

John lives with his half brother, half sister and mother. He is a very able and sociable boy. His school report comments on this and that he is well liked and respected.

John has an imaginary companion, and also an imaginary world or paracosm. Brief details are included on this, as it appears to serve purposes that other children in the study had met through their imaginary companions.

Tom

'He is 17 or 13. I always think of him as a teenager'

'He's got brown hair with bits going over his eyes'

'He's got a very fiery temper'

'He likes game-boy same as me and my brother'

'He's very similar to me'

Pinwave

'There's different parts of Pinwave. There's Lower Pinwave, Middle Pinwave and Upper Pinwave'

'Lower Pinwave mainly has people with spears because it wasn't as advanced in the medieval times and Upper Pinwave already have developed armour'

'There were giant spiders and crickets'

'It used to rain pins there'

Appendix 3.5: Pen portrait Carmel

Carmel age 10

Carmel is a bright, sociable and talkative girl. Carmel's imaginary companions emerged near the time when one of her two younger sisters was born. She has a family of imaginary friends, though only interacts with the two boys.

Tinton and Dubbish Boys age about seven

'They're that tiny, they're not big. But I can see them and no one else can see them'

'They both wear roughly the same thing. Usually a red long sleeved tee-shirt and trousers'

'It's like they're the key or something because I can tell them secrets and know they'll be safe with them'

Betty and Sinjon Good parents to Tinton and Dubbish.

They don't spoil their children. They are with Tinton and Dubbish when Carmel is not around.

Susan and Eileen

Tinton and Dubbish's baby sisters. Carmel doesn't play with them.

Appendix 4: Annotated transcript for Harry

Harry aged 6 (and comments from Sarah parent) 11 January 2006

- 1
- 2 **Harry**
- 3 K What do you most like to play or do at school?
- 4 H Play with my imagination. *Enjoys play/using imagination*
- 5 K How do you think you play with your imagination?
- 6 H Well I've got a lot of things in it so I've a lot of ideas to think up and then
- 7 just play when I'm playing with my imagination.
- 8 K Have you done that today?
- 9 H Yes.
- 10 K How have you used your imagination today?
- 11 H The person that I've used my imagination today with was an evil professor.
- 12 K Was that somebody in your mind that you made up?
- 13 H Yes.
- 14 K What happened with the evil professor?
- 15 H He got lots of powers.
- 16 K What did he do with the powers?
- 17 H He used them to do evil. He he he at school and he made a hole in the
- 18 paper and the ground, and I can't remember all the rest.
- 19 K Did you have to write a story about that or were you just allowed to think
- 20 that in your head today?
- 21 H Well I just thought in my head... I just got it in my head this morning
- 22 when I was coming back into class from play time had finished and I made
- 23 something up in for the piano. It wasn't a piano, it was an orchestra so the
- 24 orchestra, where the noise comes out the pipes in the top
- 25 K We call that an organ.
- 26 H Yeah, that kind of thing. And I had to think of a pipe and I played it and
- 27 that was the evil professor because he played 'dan dan dan dan'
- 28 (Beethoven's fifth?)
- 29 H So you had a good time at school today thinking imaginary. Thinking
- 30 about home now, what do you most like to play or do at home?
- 31 H My Charlie and the Chocolate factory game that I got the last time we had
- 32 Christmas, remember that one from Auntie Debbie and Uncle David
- 33 mummy?
- 34 K So that's your favourite game at the moment to play with?
- 35 H Yes it's really fun and it's only got five fingers ?
- 36 K Who do you like to play with?
- 37 H Simon and he's my friend.
- 38 K Is Simon in your class?
- 39 H No, he's in a different school.
- 40 K He's in a different school so you see him outside of school?
- 41 H Yes.
- 42 K Can you draw me a picture of Simon?
- 43 H Alright
- 44 K I've got felt tips or pencils, you can use both if you like.
- 45 H I'll use these when you want me to draw something, and these ones when
- 46 you're talking to my mummy.
- 47 K So this is Simon, how old is Simon?
- 48 H He's 7.
- 49 K What's Harry's date of birth (to mother)

Harry aged 6 (and comments from Sarah parent) 11 January 2006

50 S Harry's date of birth is ----. And you're now 6 and a half aren't you?
 51 H Yes, I'm six and one half on my brother's birthday and he is a month after
 52 Christmas.
 53 K What's your brother's name?
 54 H Gary and he's nine, no he's ten now. Last birthday was when he was
 55 nine.
 56

57 **Tape stopped**

58 K So that's your friend Simon isn't it that you play with outside at school?
 59 H Yes but he only has three fingers like that.
 60 K So that's your real friend, but some friends are pretend friends and make
 61 believe.
 62 H Yes, imaginary.
 63 K Have you got any imaginary friends?
 64 H Yes. *really imaginary children*
 65 K Do you want to tell me about those?
 66 H The first one's called Manager.
 67 K How did he get that name?
 68 H Because when someone looked after me after school before when I was in *origins of*
 69 reception, well she had a puppet and that came up as an imaginary friend *name -*
 70 and I called him Manager, that's how Manager came up to be my *thought up by*
 71 imaginary friend. *origins - puppet child*
 72 K So that's how you met him is it?
 73 H Yes.
 74 K Is Manager completely invisible or did you say he was based on a puppet
 75 or a toy?
 76 H A puppet. It was when Deidre looked after me.
 77 K How old is Manager?
 78 H He's about twenty now. *characteristic - IF as older / male*
 79 K Obviously he's a man if he's twenty?
 80 H Yes.
 81 K Where does Manager live?
 82 H He lives in the buddleia at the bottom of the garden.
 83 You know that place (to mother)
 84 K What does Manager like?
 85 H He likes Barnaby Bear and he's one of my imaginary friends.
 86 K So you've got Manager and you've got Barnaby Bear?
 87 H Yes and one more. Those are the three that I brought. (came in the car)
 88 S They're in the garden today. We have to go down to the bottom of the
 89 garden to get them.
 90 K So there's Manager, Barnaby Bear and who's the third one?
 91 H Ducky.
 92 S Ducky's new.
 93 H No, I got Ducky half a year ago mummy.
 94 K So you've got Barnaby Bear, Manager and Ducky.
 95 H Yes.
 96 K Do you have any other ones or are those three the main ones?
 97 H Those three are the main ones. *More than one IF*
 98 K Can I ask you some more questions about Manager?

Harry aged 6 (and comments from Sarah parent) 11 January 2006

- 99 H Yes.
- 100 K What does Manager like?
- 101 H He likes Barnaby Bear and he likes reading. *Characteristics - IF clever / enjoys learning*
- 102 K Why does he like reading?
- 103 H Because he likes a lot of words.
- 104 K Are there things that manager doesn't like?
- 105 H Manager only likes one, the only thing Manager doesn't like is things that
- 106 kill like crocodiles and sharks, they're baddies.
- 107 K What do you talk about or do with Manager? *A character, with IF meetings*
- 108 H I like playing with him and I have meetings with him.
- 109 K What goes on at the meetings?
- 110 H Pickings and more in the club house and the clubhouse is the tree house.
- 111 K So you do lots of planning about the tree house?
- 112 H Yes because he's putting new things in and puts some guards up.
- 113 K You put some guards up, why was that?
- 114 H Because at the bottom because the only way up is the steps.
- 115 S When you put the guard up is that to stop people from falling out?
- 116 H No that's to stop people from coming in. Only the people that go to my *Private World / escape*
- 117 club know how the door opens. *It's keep private world private & secure*
- 118 S Who goes to your club?
- 119 H You know, it's the people that they Barnaby, Manager
- 120 S Your friends, your imaginary friends go to your club and they're the ones
- 121 that know how to get in, is that right?
- 122 H Yes, because there is some axes so people can't get in. *IF keep world + secure*
- 123 K So just your imaginary friends can go in there?
- 124 H And me, because us people are the only people who know how to come *Private world / escape*
- 125 in.
- 126 K Does Manager usually do what you ask?
- 127 H No, he has a life of his own. He only does what I say when he's on *IF own life*
- 128 business. *travel / doing potter*
- 129 K And at other times he only does what he wants to do, does he? *Comes*
- 130 H Yes.
- 131 K Do you mind that?
- 132 H Yes, because he is my friend.
- 133 K Can you draw me a picture of manager?
- 134 H OK. But he wears a cap.
- 135 Sarah
- 136 K What does Harry like doing at home? He's told you a bit hasn't he, there's
- 137 other things he likes doing? (to mother)
- 138 S He likes pottering. At the moment because of the weather it's mainly in his *He like*
- 139 bedroom, so he potters about with his toys, arranging them all, rearranging *minors*
- 140 them, playing with them. But he'll play with them in his room so we'll find *could*
- 141 Teddy's tucked up in his bed and things like that, rather than getting a *moving*
- 142 game out, a structured game out, it's how he wants to play with his bits *home*
- 143 and pieces. So he'll take toys out of a set and do things with them rather
- 144 than play with the set that they came with.
- 145 K How much TV would you say he watched: under 5 hrs, between 5-10 hrs
- 146 or more than 10?

Harry aged 6 (and comments from Sarah parent) 11 January 2006

- 147 S He's not particularly bothered about the TV unlike his older siblings, but we
 148 do watch things like Blue Peter don't you? What was the choice again?
 149 I'd probably say 5-10 to be honest because he does watch TV on Saturday
 150 mornings.
 151 K If you had to describe Harry's personality what three words would spring to
 152 mind?
 153 S Noisy, friendly, outgoing and I'm tended to say Barking but it's because
 154 we're in Barking, eccentric.
 155 K I think that is a wonderful picture. Can I write Manager on there to remind
 156 me it's Manager?
 157
 158 Harry
 159 K What is it that you most like about Manager?
 160 H The way that he moves around a lot. *purpose: to have done to do*
 161 K Where does he go? *giving up things* Liked
 162 H Sometimes I don't know where he goes to, but sometimes I do. He goes *to the club*
 163 to my club and he goes around Barnaby Bear's house and he goes
 164 shopping and those are the things that he mostly goes to.
 165 K You like that about him, that he goes to different places?
 166 H Yes.
 167 K Are there things that you don't like about Manager?
 168 H No, nothing. *Feels towards*
 169 K If I asked you how important or special is Manager to you would you say *if all possible*
 170 that he's A)not very important... *important*
 171 H Very important.
 172 K Do you know why you say that?
 173 H No, don't know why. Well I do know why because he's very important to *if he keeps*
 174 my club because he's one of the guards and he's, Mummy, what the thing *private*
 175 that brings the things from the kitchen from the chefs that they bring to the *world*
 176 table in restaurants? *secure*
 177 S Waiters.
 178 H He's also a waiter at lunchtime in my club. And he's a lookout. *if he keeps private*
 179 K So he helps to keep people safe does he? *world secure.*
 180 H Yes and he's a sergeant and a boss. Me and Manager are the only
 181 bosses in my club. *if he's a figure in authority*
 182 S Manager used to go away on business sometimes didn't he?
 183 H yes. Like when he went to France and India.
 184 S He went to France when we went to France didn't he?
 185 K He went with you?
 186 H No he went with Ducky.
 187 K The same time as you were there?
 188 H No. A few weeks before I went. And my mommy went to India when I
 189 went, with her school.
 190 K You're both bosses, are you equal or who is the more important boss or it
 191 doesn't work like that?
 192 H Manager is the more important boss because he came up first. *older/male*
 193 K Who else knows about Manager?
 194 H The people in my family. The only people that know are the people in my
 195 family. *Public/Private*

Appendix 5: IPA steps 3 and 5 for Harry age 6

Imaginary friends (IFs): Manager, Barnaby Bear and Ducky.

Step 3 List of themes emerging from the interview:

Enjoys playing/using imagination, lines 4, 6.
Origins of name –name thought up by child, lines 68-70.
Origins of IF - based on puppet, lines 68-71 bear on TV, lines 209-210.
More than one IF, line 97.
Characteristics -IFs are older, male, lines 78, 192,315.
Characteristics - IFs clever/enjoy learning, lines 101-103, 231, 233-236, 238, 356.
Activities with IF, lines 108, 245, 247-8, 295-296.
Purpose: fulfills desire to do grown up/other things, lines 160, 490.
Private world to escape to: lines 116, 124-5.
Expresses need for IF, 309.
IFs keep private world private and secure, lines 116-117, 122,173-174, 178, 358.
Characteristics - IFs have own lives/travels/child partial control lines 127, 162-4, 183, 250-1, 477-479.
IFs life mirrors child's, lines 183-188, moving house 224-226,
Liked characteristics, lines 160, 295-6.
Feelings towards IFs all positive/important, lines 168,
Characteristics of IFs leading figure in authority, lines 180, 358.
Public/Private, lines 194-195
Status of IFs; best friend, lines 204, 352.
Child creates to meet purpose, lines 307-310, 488.
Identification with IFs, lines 332-3, 338.

Step 5 Clustering themes and summary table of themes

Theme	Quote	Page/Line no.
1. Origins of IF 1 st name thought up, based on puppet,	'I called him manager'	line 70
2. Characteristics of IFs IFs older, male Live in bottom of the garden in buddleia tree IFs clever IFs have own lives/child partial control Leading figures, in authority IF has flat feet More than one IF	'He's about twenty now' 'He lives in the buddleia' 'words that are important in space books' 'he has a life of his own' 'he's a sergeant and a boss' 'me and Ducky have got flat feet' 'those 3 are the main ones'	line 78 line 82 line 235 line 127 line 180 line 338 line 97
3. Activities with IFs Play 'cops and robbers', stroke fur IFs mirrors child's, moving house	'I play with him a lot' 'he used to live in the buddleia tree'	line 245 lines 224-225
4. Purposes of having IF Private world to escape to Desire to do grown up/other things IFs keep private world secure Child creates to meet need – swim companion	'are the only people who know how to come in' 'when he tells me lots of things.. 'he's a lookout' 'he helps me swim'	lines 124-5 line 383-4 line 178 line 381
5. Child's feelings towards IF All positive/IF important IF is one of child's best friends Child identifies with IF flat feet in common Expresses need for IF	'Very important' 'he's one of my best friends' 'me and Ducky have got flat feet' 'I needed it to be a swimming one'	line 171 line 204 lines 338-339 line 309.
6. Public/private nature of IFs Only known to family	'the only people that know are the people in my family'	194-5

Appendix 6: TABLE A: A Summary List of Super ordinate and Clustered Themes from Child Interviews

Code: **Bold heading = Super ordinate theme** *heading in italic = sub theme* normal text = cluster theme

Super ordinate Theme 1	Antonio	Harry	Lisa	John	Carmel
Child's Relationships with Imaginary Companions	Age 5	Age 6	Age 6	Age 8	Age 10
<i>1.1 Characteristics of imaginary companions (ICs)</i>					
• Child has more than one IC	2.49	2.97	1.40		1.42
• Origin of name/character	2.53	2.70	4.162		2.72
• IC is older male character	1.34	2.78		10.497	
• IC is dependable			5.208		2.76
• IC has life away from child		3.127			4.15-/9
<i>1.2 Child's interactions with ICs</i>					
• Plays/talks with ICs	4.150	6.245	4.179	13.578	3.142-3
• Relate to events in child's life	2.77-8	5.225		13.587-8	7.307
• IC rude/annoys/fights/hurts child	4.166		3.103	12.574	
• Child uses hand gesture to collect ICs					2.95
<i>1.3 Child's feelings about ICs</i>					
• Says ICs are important/very important	4.146	4.171	3.1		5.197
• Would feel sad/very sad if not there	4.152	5.202	5.210		5.201
• Child has things in common with IC	5.202	7.338	2.68	11.508	2.73
Super ordinate Theme 1	Antonio	Harry	Lisa	John	Carmel
<i>1.4 Child perceives ICs meet their needs</i>					

• Child expresses need for ICs	4.153	7.309			2.76
• Says IC is companion/best friend/playmate	4.146	5.204	5.208	13.591	4.169-70
• Says ICs help them/help bad feelings go away	4.149	10.488		13.588-9	7.308-9
• Says ICs overcome boredom/loneliness			5.211	11.518	2.91

Super ordinate Theme 2 Social Context

2.1 Public and private dimensions

• ICs known to family and some friends				3.126	5.212
• ICs Only known to family	6.285	2.194		12.546	
• IC is secret with brother/friends			3.122		12.571
• Child seeks privacy to interact with IC				11.519-20	7.315-6

2.2 Response/considers response of others

• Classmates don't understand/negative					5.213-4
• Parent has positive view of ICs			3.136-7		
• Child feels embarrassed					3.107-8

Appendix 7: Parent information and consent letter

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Monday 16th June, 2008.

Dear Parent

Research about children's imaginary friends

This letter is to let you know about research on children's imaginary friends which is being conducted at ----- School. *I would be grateful if you could read the information below and return the form attached if you would prefer that your child does not participate.*

My name is Karen Majors. I am an Educational Psychologist and Tutor at the Institute of Education, University of London. This research is undertaken as part of my doctorate studies.

This research is about children's imaginary friends. Little research has been done in this area. Most studies that have been carried out show them to be a positive feature in the lives of the children who have them. Studies also show that they are rather more common than we might suppose and that older as well as younger children have them. An aim of this study is to find out more about the imaginary friends themselves, and about the purposes they might serve for the child. Your child's participation in the research will be extremely valuable whether your child has an imaginary friend or not.

All children in selected classes (unless parents have indicated that they would prefer their child not to participate) will be asked to complete a short questionnaire at school. The questionnaire will ask about children's favourite activities at school and at home and whether they have or have had imaginary friends. Children who say that they do or have had an imaginary friend are asked to give brief details. They are also asked whether they would be willing to take part in an interview which will take place at school. Some or all of the children reporting imaginary friends will be invited for an interview – this will depend on numbers identified!

The interview will last for approximately half an hour. Children will be asked to give descriptions of their imaginary friends, say how they play or talk to them, and whether and how they are important to them. The purpose of the study will be explained to each child, and also that they do not have to answer any question they do not wish to and that they can withdraw from the study at any time.

Information provided will be treated confidentially. Children's names will be not be used in any report of findings, and quotes of what the children said will remain anonymous.

I am very willing to answer any questions you have about the research. I can be normally be contacted on:

Monday and Tuesday on 020 8 270 6900
Wednesday and Thursday: 020 7 612 6283

If you would prefer that your child does not take part in the research please return the form below to -----.

Thank you

Karen Majors
Academic and Professional Tutor Head teacher

Imaginary Friends Research Participation Form

Name of Parent _____ Name of child _____

I would prefer that my child does not take part in this research.

Thank you very much for your help

Please return this form to ----- by Friday 4th July.

Karen Majors
Academic and Professional Tutor

Appendix 8: Imaginary Friends Questionnaire

Do you have an imaginary friend?

Imaginary friends are invisible friends that some children play with or talk to. We don't know much about these friends, although we do know that they are often special and important to the children that have them. We have now found out that older children as well as younger children have imaginary friends.

This questionnaire is to find out about the imaginary friends that some children have or used to have. If you do not wish to complete the questionnaire, you do not need to, and you can miss out any question you do not wish to answer. Whether you choose to complete the questionnaire or not, please put the questionnaire in the envelope so that it can be collected.

What is your name? _____

How old are you? _____

Favourite things to do:

What 3 things do you most like to play or do at school?



1.

2.

3.

What 3 things do you most like to play or do at home?



1.

2.

3.

Imaginary friends in the past:



Did you have an imaginary friend when you were younger? **Yes**____ **No**____

How old were you when you had your imaginary friend? _____

What was your friend's name? _____

What were they like?

If you had more than one imaginary friend please write their name(s) below:

Imaginary friends now:

Do you have an imaginary friend at the moment? **Yes**____ **No**____

[If you answered No, please go to the end of the questionnaire]

What is the name of your imaginary friend? _____

What are they like? _____

How long have you known your imaginary friend?

How often do you communicate with your imaginary friend?

In the school holidays _____ Just occasionally _____



About once a week _____ Most days _____

If you have more than one imaginary friend, please write the names of the other(s) here:

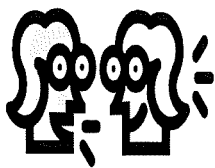
Does any one in your family know about your imaginary friend? **Yes** _____ **No** _____

Do any of your friends know about your imaginary friend? **Yes** _____ **No** _____

Talking to children who have imaginary friends:

Some of the children who have imaginary friends will be invited to talk to Karen Majors. She will ask them about what their imaginary friends are like and what they like about them. She will meet with each child for about half an hour in school next week.

Would you be willing to talk about your imaginary friend(s)? **Yes** _____ **No** _____



Thank you very much for completing this questionnaire!

Please put it in the envelope and it will be collected.

Karen Majors

Appendix 9: Child semi-structured interview schedule

Imaginary Friends

Name:_____ **D.O.B:**_____

Name of parent:_____ **Date:**_____

Introduction:

My name is Karen. I'm learning about children's imaginary friends. Do you remember completing the questionnaire about imaginary friends? You said then that you did have an imaginary friend(s) and that you would be prepared to talk with me about them. Is it still OK if I talk with you about that?

If you don't want to answer a question you don't have to. If you want to stop the interview that is fine and you don't have to give a reason. What you tell me is confidential (unless you tell me something that makes me think you may not be safe). When I write in my reports what some children have told me – I give them a different name, so that people won't know who said it. Is that OK?

I'm going to turn the tape on to record this – so that I don't have to remember what we talked about. Is that OK?

Record on tape: This is Karen talking to: _____

Warm up: About you:

- a. What would be your idea of a perfect Saturday? (Prompt what would you be doing, who with)
- b. Who do you like to play with/talk to?
- c. Do you have brothers and or sisters? (Take details of names and ages)

Factual/Exploratory:

1. Do you have one imaginary friend or more than one?
2. What is your friend's name?
3. Where did that name come from?
4. Is your friend completely invisible or based on a toy or stuffed animal?
5. Can you tell me about him/her/it/them?
(prompts age, gender, physical appearance, size, colour, where lives and sleeps, likes, dislikes, personality, habits, relationships).
6. How did you meet your friend?
7. What do you do or talk about with your imaginary friend?
8. Where do you meet up with your imaginary friend?
9. Does ____ usually do what you ask? (Do they sometimes surprise you when they say something, do something? Tell me about that)

Feelings towards:

10. What do you like most about your imaginary friend? (Prompt: do they help you? fun to be with?)
11. Are there things you dislike about your imaginary friend?
12. How important/special is your imaginary to you? Prompt - not important, important, very important. Can you say why?
13. How would you feel if you didn't have imaginary friends? (prompt: how would things be different?).

Views of others:

14. Does anyone else know about your imaginary friend? (Prompt: parent, brother, sister, friend, teacher. What do they say, what do they do? What do they think about it?)

If the imaginary friend is not known to others:

15. What do you think others would say or think if they knew? (parent, teacher, sibling, friend, classmate)
16. What would you say to parents whose child has an imaginary friend and they are not sure what to say or do? (Prompt: show interest, ignore it?)

Exit:

17. If the imaginary friend has gone: What happened to your imaginary friend?
(Prompt: when, where to, why)

Ask about other previous imaginary friends and other imaginary creations - go through questions above as appropriate.

End:

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your imaginary friend?
Do you have anything you would like to ask me?

Thank child

Appendix 10: Annotated transcript for Holly

Holly 11

1. K: Remember when I came into your classroom and
2. every body filled in a questionnaire?
3. H: Yes
4. K: Well just to say that I'm going to ask you some questions –
5. but if you don't want to answer a question just say you don't
6. want to answer that one. And some you might not
7. remember anyway, because sometimes I'm going to ask
8. about things which happened in the past, then during the
9. interview if you think 'oh I don't want to do this anymore',
10. you can just say can we stop now – alright?
11. H: Yes
12. K: I'm going to write this up. But if I write something up that
13. you said, I'm going to give you a fictitious name – so nobody
14. will know it's you that said it. So it keeps it confidential. OK?
15. So shall I start with the imaginary friend you've got now?
16. Your horse?
17. H: Yes
18. K: Then I'll ask you about ones you had in the past. So your
19. horse is called Dream and how did it come to get that
20. name?
21. H: I was playing with my sisters with the horses and then
22. after that I started playing with them on my own.
23. K: Great and what is your sister's name?
24. H: Jessica
25. K: How old is Jessica?
26. H: She's twelve
27. K: Do you have any brothers and sisters?
28. H: No only her
29. K: OK and so what does Dream look like?
30. H: It's an Arab and its white and it's like it's just a pony. It's a
31. work pony. When I'm not there, people who work for me
32. look after it.
33. K: So tell me who works for you?
34. H: I don't really know their names. They're just random people.
35. K: Can you see them in your mind's eye?
36. H: Yes, but they're people that I'm very nice to, so I don't
37. think of them as servants. They're, I don't want there to be
38. (2 of them?) They're about my height.
39. K: Do you talk to them at all?
40. H: Yes, a bit – every so often.
41. K: Yes. How often do you have contact with Dream?
42. H: Not very often, but every so often when I'm a bit bored and
43. and a bit lonely.
44. K: So if you want to have contact with Dream – do you have

Sister 12

Started playing
horse game –
questionnaire
still favourite
game

IC nurtured
child in charge

servants relatively
small to Holly

feelings based
lovely – linked to
puppy

Child uses
IC in
horse games

IC looked for
after when
NSR with child

Child in
control?

overcome
boredom
loneliness

- accessibility =
can confuse up a
constant companion
strong visual
image
beautiful
- frank/quarks
fussy scared
- H has friendly
difficulties
others mean
doesn't always want
to talk to mum
- can talk to IC/
dependable
doesn't judge
- u
- IC used in
different situations
partly
concealed
IC status not known
H others
45. wait for Dream to contact you or can you just think 'I
46. want to see Dream now' and then you see him?
47. H: I always imagine she's next to me if I want her, so I can
48. just talk to her. *always available*
49. K: Yes, OK, great. SO tell me a bit more about Dream
50. H: She's white and she has nice shoes, and she's like those
51. horses who have black and white striped hooves. She
52. basically has them and then one black hoof right at the *physically attractive*
53. front and she's like a dressage horse - she's very
54. beautiful and her hair is quite long - it's down to here.
55. K: She sounds very attractive.
56. H: Yes
57. K: What size is she?
58. H: Erm 13.2 hands high
59. K: Where does she live?
60. H: Just where I am. She kinda doesn't live anywhere.
61. K: Uh huh Has she got anything that she particularly likes?
62. H: She likes sugar cubes and apples.
63. K: Yes
64. H: And she likes a special type of hay - she's quite fussy a lot (*Fussy*)
65. of the time.
66. K: Yes. Is there anything she doesn't like?
67. H: She's scared of sacks like most horses and she doesn't like (*scared*)
68. fire. *support re*
69. K: Yes OK. What do you do or talk about with Dream? *friendship*
70. H: Uh - I have a lot of problems sometimes in school because *difficulties*
71. my friend can be really mean to me a lot of the time (sighs)
72. and sometimes I talk to my mum because she's a
73. psychologist and sometimes I talk to her. But you can't
74. always count on mum so that's why I talk to Dream *dependable*
75. sometimes.
76. K: And how does Dream help you?
77. H: Well if I'm angry at someone she's not going to say
78. anything back - she'll just listen *listening skills*
79. K: Hmm *good listener*
80. A: And she'll always be on my side. My sister, if I have an (*takes child's*)
81. argument with her - she'll always agree with me and not *side*
82. my sister- she won't come back at me.
83. K: Yes and so if some one's upset you, you might have some
84. contact with Dream - do you ever play games or have
85. adventures with her?
86. H: Yes, I play this game with my friend, um we had this walk
87. and we got lost in the forest and I used her for that and I
88. used her for a lot of games as well. I had this stable once - *use s/c x 2*
89. she was one of the horses. *in games*
90. K: OK - so when you mentioned your friend - did your friend

If out in
 public yet
 identity
 concealed
 questionnaire
 filled, then
 correct answer?
 unsure of possible
 parent response -
 how the consciously
 might react to this?
 & body ID
 imaginary games
 more mature
 links with for
 interviews
 - ICs nearly
 enough to
 hidden
 might be
 vulnerable to
 being
 IC has own will/
 parents - not under
 his control
 once ICs look after
 IC when child is
 away
 IC is nurtured

91. know about Dream?
 92. H: No she didn't. She just knew we had horses. In my mind
 93. it was Dream.
 94. K: Yes
 95. H: And I kind of (spoken very quickly) did something
 96. (inaudible) the test said that my family know about my
 97. horse - they don't actually.
 98. K: They don't
 99. H: They don't actually know about her. My sister knows that
 100. we have the game, she doesn't actually know that I play
 101. with the horse.
 102. K: Yes - so what would your family say if they did know
 103. about Dream?
 103. H: (pause) Umm I don't know. I think they'd be supportive but
 104. I don't know. Maybe my sister wouldn't be - well I play
 105. Imaginary games but you know imaginary friends is kind of
 106. like something you'd call for babies and stuff. So it's not
 107. like an imaginary friend like they have in all the games and
 108. stuff, it's just something like you know in a different way,
 109. kind of...
 110. K: So you think your sister might think it's babyish? And your
 111. not sure what your parents would think?
 112. H: And I only just found out that my friend had one as well - just
 113. now cos apparently she talked to you as well. I found out
 114. that she had one.
 115. K: Oh right
 116. H: So I feel a lot more confident about it now
 117. K: Oh good - so do you feel a bit reassured that there's other
 118. people, that your friends have them and you didn't know?
 119. H: Yes
 120. K: That's great!
 121. H: I mean they don't tease me about it - so that's good
 122. K: Yes OK. (pause) Would Dream usually do what you ask?
 123. H: Well she doesn't really take orders from me - she's kind of
 124. independent. Like I say, she's a bit fussy - so she's a bit
 125. 'oooh no, I'm not gonna do that'...
 126. K: Does she sometimes surprise you when she says
 127. something or does something?
 128. H: Sometimes - she kind of jumps up but nothing really else.
 129. K: So what happens to her when you're not there?
 130. H: Like I said - the people take care of her. I don't know
 131. where she is, I just know she's been taken care of so...
 132. K: So you know where she's being looked after - but you
 133. don't particularly know what she's doing...
 134. H: No
 135. K: OK great

identity
 concealed in
 games
 unknown
 to family
 uncertain of
 parent response
 ICs a sign
 of immaturity
 friend concealed
 her IC
 could
 might be teased
 IC has
 independent
 will
 IC looked after
 when child not here
 to

IC own life |
capable
clever

Contributes more
than playmate
- purpose

ch not trying
fr control - enjoy
quirks/traits & IC
increases sense
of reality
discussion.

releases signs
of independence
challenge

? parallel with
friends not doing
things - learning to
deal with it?

? but only goes
occasionally
to relation - purpose
hesitant
uncertain
feels I wouldn't
be overhyped.

not how new yet
- very private.

& enables ch to be less
reliant on parent
- IC helps develop
autonomy +
self coping?

136.H: Sometimes she might be in a show as well

137.K: Yes, um, would you go to the show or you just know she's
being in a show that day?

139.H: I know - because she's such a professional that I don't need
to go with her.

141.K: Is it like a dressage thing?

142.H: Yes, and every so often show jumping, yes.

143.K: Yes, great. What do you most like about Dream?

144.H: umm - her listening skills

145.K: She's a good listener is she? And what else?

146.H: Her appearance

147.K: Is there anything you don't like about Dream?

148.H: The fact that she's fussy

149.K: Yes, so she's fussy about that hay...

150.H: (Comes in quickly and emphatically) the thing is - I don't
want a perfect horse - it just makes it annoying kind of

152.K: So you don't want it perfect?

153.H: And when I'm riding I don't want her to do exactly what I

154. say if she doesn't do it (inaudible) so I'm going to have to

155. whip her and stuff - make it fun (pause) It does get

156. annoying sometimes (gasps)

157.K: It does get annoying sometimes but you wouldn't have it

158. any other way. If I said to you how important is Dream, like

159. very important, quite important, very important...

160.H: I'd say she is extremely important, um because if I don't

161. have her I think I might be a bit lonely and times... I'd have

162. to speak to my mum about everything, it would feel a bit

163. weird.

164.K: Yes

165.H: But if I play with her 24/7 it feels a bit weird, if I'm just

166. playing with an imaginary thing all day so I like the fact

167. that I (inaudible)

168.K: So you just like to have a bit of contact now and again

169.H: Yes

170.K: Can you say a bit more about what would your mum say

171. about Dream if she knew about her, about you having her?

172.H: Err (pause) I think she might (pause) she wouldn't be

173. harsh on me, but just you know sometimes she might have

174. said 'did you just make that up right now to get

175. affection?' or something she can be like she always thinks

176. there's a catch to something

177.K: And what about your sister?

178.H: Well she wouldn't be too bad you know - it's not like...

179.K: No, but she'd tease you a little bit?

180.H: The thing is I'm only going to tell my close friends that, in

181. my class, my very close friends, because some others I

IC has life away
from child.

competent

listening skills

physical
attraction

could values
ICs independently
C = ch

could not
seeking
compliment
control

Extremely imp.

Avoid I make
IC good alternative

to parent

C regulates +
contact with IC

would only
tell close
friends.

Appendix 11: IPA step 3 for Holly

Theme	Quote	Page/Line no.
<i>Italic indicates quotes of previous not current imaginary companions</i>		
Overcome boredom	'when I'm a bit bored'	1.42
Frequency of contact	'not very often'	1.42
Always available	'she's next to me if I want her'	2.47
Physically appealing/attractive	'she's very beautiful'	2.53-54
Support re friendship difficulties	'my friend can be really mean to me'	2.71-2
Dependable	'that's why I talk to Dream'	2.74
Good listening skills	'she'll just listen'	2.78
Child uses IC in games	'I used her for a lot of games as well'	2.87-8
Identity concealed in games	'she just knew we had horses'	3.92
Unknown to family	'they don't actually know about her'	3.99
Uncertain of parent response	'I think they'd be supportive but I don't know'	3.103-4
ICs seen as a sign of immaturity	'IFs is...like something you'd call for babies'	3.105-6
Friend concealed their IC	'I only just found out that my friend had one'	3.112
Child teaches/directs/nurtures IC	'I taught Dora how to swim'	7.296-7
IC has independent will	'she doesn't really take orders from me'	3.123
IC is looked after when child not there	'the people take care of her'	3.130

IC has life away from child	'sometimes she might be in a show'	4.136
Competent/clever	'she's such a professional'	4.139
Listening skills	'her listening skills'	4.144
Physical appearance/attractiveness	'her appearance'	4.146
IC is fussy	'the fact that she's fussy'	4.148
Child values ICs independent character	'I don't want a perfect horse'	4.150-1
IC not compliant	'if she doesn't do it'	4.154
Child not seeking compliance/control	'I don't want her to do exactly what I say'	4.153-4
Very/extremely important	'I'd say she was extremely important'	4.160
Avoid loneliness	'if I don't have her I think I might be a bit lonely'	4.160-1
IC good alternative to parent	'I'd have to speak to my mum about everything'	4.161-2
Would only tell close friends	'I'm only going to tell my close friends'	4.180
Lack of trust	'because some others I can't trust'	4.181-2
Two faced	'behind my back they may say something else'	5.185-6
Spread rumours	'and spread rumours and stuff'	5.189
IC has own likes/dislikes	'Oh another thing she doesn't like is..'	5.203
<i>Always available</i>	<i>'they used to come with me everywhere'</i>	5.217
Competent clever	<i>'really clever'</i>	5.220-1
<i>IC has desired traits</i>	<i>'so I made her have blonde hair and blue eyes'</i>	6.226-7
<i>IC is child's twin</i>	<i>'she was exactly like me'</i>	6.227-8
Child perceives similarities with IC	'I have a cocker spaniel so she had a cocker s'	6.228-9

IC chooses to play with child	'if I was lonely she would play with me'	6.233
Has adventures with IC	'We used to solve problems with us + our dogs'	6.241-3
Child regulates contact with IC	'but I wouldn't do it 24/7'	6.246
<i>IC sometimes preferred to friends</i>	<i>'I'd just play with Lily'</i>	6.249
<i>ICs are special</i>	<i>'I think she was more special than Dream'</i>	6.255
<i>Have fun</i>	<i>'they were so fun'</i>	6.261
<i>Wish fulfilment</i>	<i>'I always wanted a twin'</i>	7.281
<i>Not a substitute for friends</i>	<i>'I already have friends....'</i>	7.279-80
Child teaches/directs/nurtures IC	'I taught Dora how to swim'	7.296-7
<i>IC is based on real animals</i>	<i>'Real, real, I imagine them as real dogs'</i>	7.307
<i>IC is a strong visual image</i>	<i>'I know exactly what they look like'</i>	7.308
<i>Feelings of loss</i>	<i>'yes, I really miss them'</i>	8.318
<i>Most liked</i>	<i>'they had such cute faces'</i>	8.324

Theme	Quote	Page/Line no.
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Italic indicates quotes of previous not current imaginary companions

Characteristics of ICs

Positive characteristics

Always available	'she's next to me if I want her'	2.47
Physically appealing/attractive	'she's very beautiful'	2.53-54
Dependable	'that's why I talk to Dream'	2.74
Good listener	'she'll just listen'	2.78
Competent/clever	'she's such a professional'	4.139
Listening skills	'her listening skills'	4.144
<i>IC has desired traits</i>	<i>'so I made her have blonde hair and blue eyes'</i>	<i>6.226-7</i>
<i>IC is child's twin</i>	<i>'she was exactly like me'</i>	<i>6.227-8</i>

Negative characteristics

Fussy	'The fact that she's fussy'	4.148
Not compliant	'if she doesn't do it'	4.154
<i>Clumsy</i>	<i>'he was clumsy'</i>	<i>5.219</i>

IC seems real

IC has independent will	'she doesn't really take orders from me'	3.123
IC has own likes/dislikes	'Oh another thing she doesn't like is..'	5.203
IC chooses to play with child	'if I was lonely she would play with me'	6.233
IC has life away from child	'sometimes she might be in a show'	4.136
<i>IC is based on real animals</i>	<i>'Real, real, I imagine them as real dogs'</i>	<i>7.307</i>
<i>IC is a strong visual image</i>	<i>'I know exactly what they look like'</i>	<i>7.308</i>
IC is looked after when child not there	'the people take care of her'	3.130

Child's interactions with ICs

Frequency of contact	'not very often'	1.42
Child values ICs independent character	'I don't want a perfect horse'	4.150-1
Child not seeking compliance/control	'I don't want her to do exactly what I say'	4.153-4
Child regulates contact with IC	'But I wouldn't do it 24/7'	6.246
Child perceives similarities with IC	'I have a cocker spaniel so she had a cocker s'	6.228-9
Has adventures with ICs	'We used to solve problems with us + our dogs'	6.241-3
Child uses IC in games	'I used her for a lot of games as well'	2.87-8
<i>Not a substitute for friends</i>	<i>'I already have friends....'</i>	<i>7.279-80</i>
<i>IC sometimes preferred to friends</i>	<i>'I'd just play with Lily'</i>	<i>6.249</i>
Child teaches/directs/nurtures IC	'I taught Dora how to swim'	7.296-7

Purposes served by the imaginary companions

Overcome boredom	'when I'm a bit bored'	1.42
Avoid loneliness	'if I don't have her I think I might be a bit lonely'	4.160-1
IC good alternative to parent	'I'd have to speak to my mum about everything'	4.161-2
Support re friendship difficulties	'my friend can be really mean to me'	2.71-2
<i>Have fun</i>	<i>'they were so fun'</i>	6.261
<i>Wish fulfilment</i>	<i>'I always wanted a twin'</i>	7.281

Anticipated/perceived responses of others

Uncertain of parent response	'I think they'd be supportive but I don't know'	3.103-4
ICs seen as a sign of immaturity	'IFs is...like something you'd call for babies'	3.105-6
Two faced	'behind my back they may say something else'	5.185-6
Spread rumours	'and spread rumours and stuff'	5.189

Conceals of ICs

Unknown to family	'they don't actually know about her'	3.99
Identity concealed in games	'she just knew we had horses'	3.92
Friend concealed their IC	'I only just found out that my friend had one'	3.112
Would only tell close friends	'I'm only going to tell my close friends'	4.180
Lack of trust	'because some others I can't trust'	4.181-2

Appendix 12 Table B: A Summary List of Superordinate and Clustered Themes

Study 2

Code: **Bold heading** = superordinate theme *heading in italic* = *sub theme* normal text = cluster theme

Superordinate theme 1: Characteristics of imaginary companions (ICs)

<i>Positive characteristics</i>	Holly	Tara	Ella
Good friend/dependable/listens	2.47	2.74	1.8
IC has similar characteristics to child	6.227-8		1.30-31
<i>Negative characteristics</i>			
IC shows unfriendly behaviour to child/non compliant	4.154	9.405	
IC is fussy	4.148		
IC is clumsy	5.219		
<i>IC seems real</i>			
IC has independent will	3.123	10.442	2.74-6
IC has life away from child	4.136	10.429	3.117
IC is based on real animals/people	7.307	3.100	2.46

Superordinate theme 2: Child's interactions with imaginary companions

<i>Nature of interaction</i>	Holly	Tara	Ella
Enjoyable/games/adventures	2.87-8	2.58-60	1.13-14
Child teaches/directs/nurtures IC	7.296-7	6.244	
Frequency of contact	1.42	6.257	2.79-83
<i>Purposes served</i>	Holly	Tara	Ella
Overcome boredom /loneliness	4.161	11.472	1.10
Support re difficult situations	2.70-2	8.327	2.89
Wish fulfilment	7.281	11.494	

Superordinate theme 3: Imaginary companions and the real world

<i>Anticipated/perceived responses of others</i>	Holly	Tara	Ella
Uncertain of parent response	3.103-4	8.360	5.184
ICs seen as a sign of immaturity	3.105-6	11.455	
Negative response from peers	5.189	10.453	5.194
<i>Conceals ICs</i>			
Unknown to family	3.99	8.341	4.173
Identity of IC concealed in games/friend partially aware	3.92	8.344	

Appendix 13: Comparison of imaginary companion characteristics among normative and Dissociation Identity Disorder samples

Factors	Normative samples	DID samples
Incidence of ICs	9.8%-46.2%	42%-84%
Number of ICs	1-2 each	6.5 each
Age appears	Early childhood	Early childhood
Age disappears	By late childhood (mean=10 yrs)	May persist into adolescence/adulthood
Reality and vividness	Less vivid ICs with no reality confusion	Very vivid ICs with some reality confusion
Impersonation	Occasional impersonation	Persistent impersonation
Role/function	Companionship most common	Complex roles, including protection
Nature	Benevolent, under child's control	Sometimes malevolent, acting against child.

Reproduced from McLewin, L., & Muller, R. (2006) Childhood trauma, imaginary companions and the development of pathological dissociation. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 11(5), 531-45